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OCT.

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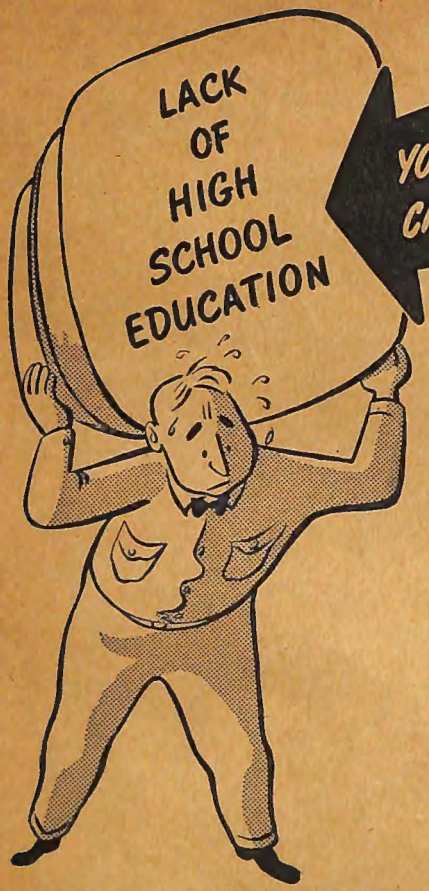
A Complete Jim Hatfield Novel

By JACKSON COLE



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TEXAS RANGERS

VOLUME 24, NUMBER 2 A THRILLING PUBLICATION OCTOBER 1946

COMPLETE NOVEL

RANGE PIRATES

by Jackson Cole

Jim Hatfield rides into battle to smash the sinister schemes of conquest engineered by a wily outlaw chief who plans to rule a vast empire on both sides of the Rio! Follow the Lone Wolf Ranger as he pits himself against the evil henchmen of a greedy range tyrant! 9

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While pursuing kidnapers, Littlejohn has his own troubles with the law

AND

THE FRONTIER POST by Captain Starr 6
A friendly get-together confab for readers, plus announcements and letters

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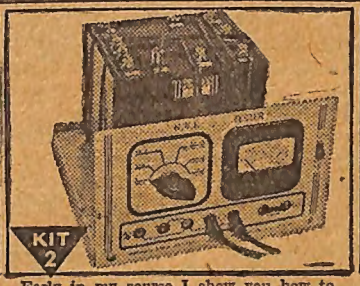

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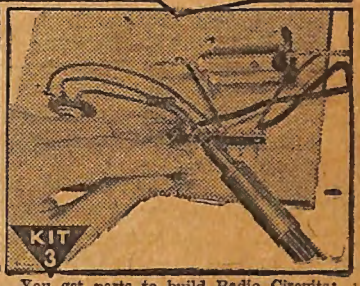

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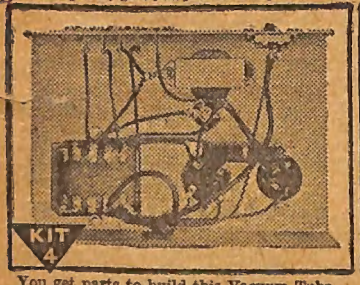

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HIYA, gals and galluses! Plenty of stories you read in this TEXAS RANGERS Magazine have their locale in the Big Bend country, which is still one of the wildest, least-settled parts of United States. Just before Pearl Harbor the Lone Star State set aside one and one-half million dollars to buy Big Bend land, as a step in making that scenic, historic region into an international park.

Big Bend is immense—nearly 800,000 acres on the American side of the Rio Grande, 500,000 acres on the Mexican side. But the plan to make it into a park and perpetual wilderness, fifth largest in North America, was postponed through the war. But now, I'm plumb happy to report, the Big Bend movement is on foot again and one o' these days Park Service Rangers will have charge of this onetime bailiwick of Texas Rangers. We feel pretty good about it—deep in the heart of Texas.

Rugged Peaks

Big Bend lifts from desert-like plains to rugged peaks with a top altitude of 7,835 feet, which are the southernmost spur of the Rocky Mountains. No railroads, hardly any roads—just trails. In time to come there'll be paved highway clean through it and Big Bend will be as famous a winter tourist attraction as Yellowstone is as a summer playground.

While we're touching on the desert subject, I hanker to discuss a number of things that've come up lately—mainly old myths and fables about the dry Southwest.

The first thing I aim to do is to blast the old belief that desert animals get their water from cactus. Right recent, a big national magazine came out with the statement that desert bighorn sheep subsist on the pulpy heart of bisnaga and saguaro—which are barrel and giant tree cacti.

I reckon I can disprove that in one sentence. That is, the region where bighorn are most numerous (in south central Nevada and on the California desert) haven't one single specimen of saguaro! And in many years of wandering over these parts, I haven't seen more'n a half-dozen barrel cactus that man or animal has attacked for thirst-quenching purposes.

Wild Burros Are Guilty

In a few cases when this happens, wild burros are the guilty parties. The mistaken mag said that bighorn nip off the sharp thorns with their teeth before biting into the juicy cactus. The truth is, burros gouge the plants with their hoofs when forced to wet their whistles thataway. Cattle perishing for want of water go about it the same way.

On top of it all, saguaro cactus is tough and stringy, with mighty little juice in it except right after a rain when the plant soaks up a season's supply. Some species of barrel cactus, when dug out hollow, yield a few cupsful of clear, water-like fluid.

So there you are, folks. If bighorn really depended on cactus for their water, they'd mighty soon eradicate the last specimen of the comparatively rare and slow-growing plants.

If you're still in doubts on the subject, I refer you to Ray Alcorn, field naturalist for the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service at Las Vegas, Nevada. Mr. Alcorn has charge of the area that has more desert bighorns than anywhere else in the West.

Lost Mines

A reader hombre writes in to ask me about lost mines and where they're located. Seems like he wants a complete list of same, put in handy form like a mail-order catalogue.

Well, *amigo*, no such list exists, although lost mines and hidden treasure has been a

(Continued on page 90)

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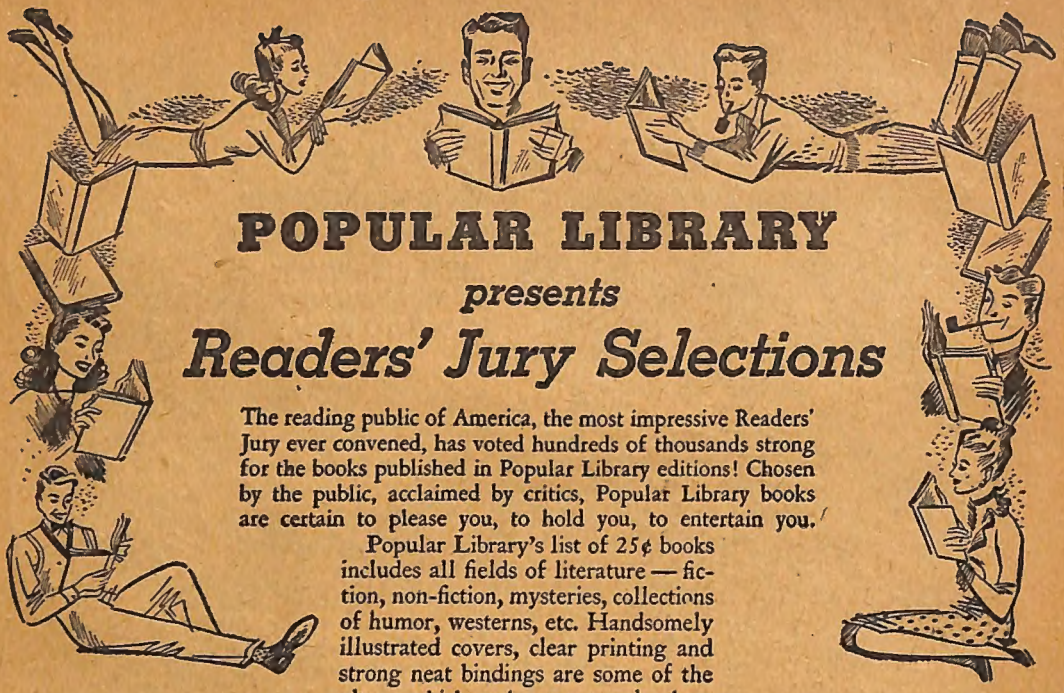

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Jake's carbine fired, but Ranger lead had already caught him in the chest (CHAPTER IV)

RANGE PIRATES

By JACKSON COLE

The Lone Wolf Ranger rides into battle to smash sinister schemes of conquest engineered by a wily outlaw chieftain who plans to rule a vast empire on both sides of the Rio!

CHAPTER I

Smoky Death

THE night air had a smoky quality. It hung like a thick-scented gray pall over the men squatted near the cook-fire.

They were under tension and had little to say, the bearded, fierce-eyed fellows whose Colts were strapped on and who kept their carbines and shotguns close at hand. It was plain they had made a long, fast run, for they were sweated and dusty. They had paused now to rest their mounts, to eat and drink, pulling off the winding red clay road

A COMPLETE JIM HATFIELD NOVEL

which ran southeast from the vast Texas hinterland.

Knives clinked during the meal. Strips of beef had been broiled on sharp sticks, and there was hardtack, washed down by whisky. Peepers, frogs and tree toads kept up an insistent din, for nearby was the oily waters of a great swamp. The dampish wood they were burning gave off acrid smoke, and there was mist as well. For they were near the Gulf, and arms of the sea, salt-water lagoons and swamps, penetrated for many miles inland.

Close at hand, held off the road while the drovers ate, stood a band of mustangs, coats caked with dust and sweat. The weary hang of maned heads and the willingness of the animals to rest, showed how hard they had been driven.

A faint whistle sounded from the road, and the men quickly looked up, trigger fingers tensing. A rider came into the light.

"Six men a-comin', licketty-split!" he called. "I seen 'em back at Whichway and one's that fool who's been on my trail so long. I thought we'd shook him, but he short-cut over here. Well, it's the last time he'll stick his cussed nose into my business. Four of yuh stick here. The rest get in among the trees and wait till I signal."

Swiftly the preparations were made. A quartet of the armed men remained in the ruby firelight.

It was eerie, waiting in the dark night, the stillness broken only by Nature's sounds. Suddenly, guns cluck-clucked as they were cocked. The pursuers had dismounted and crept in through the swampy brush afoot to surround the bivouac.

"Throw down, and reach!" called a harsh, triumphant voice. "We've come up with yuh, hoss-thieves!"

The men at the fire quickly obeyed. Their captors came into the light. They were grim-faced cowmen in leather and big Stetsons, but their leader was a strong-looking figure in black leather trousers, a blue shirt and a straight black hat. A lawman's badge glinted on his chest. It was he who had spoken.

"Where's that devil of a boss of yores?" he demanded. "I been on his trail from the Gulf and back!"

Coming with the words, guns flamed from the shadows. The leader of the pursuers caught hot lead in his head and body. He staggered, whirled and fell, and his cheek and shoulder rested in the fire. A sickening odor mingled with the dank, smoky mist.

There was no mercy in the hearts of the killers.

"Drag that carrion back and throw it in the swamp," the outlaw leader growled, when it was over.

He stooped and seized the booted ankle of the dead law officer, pulled him out of the fire and rolled the body over.

"I'll keep his badge, boys," he said. "It may come in handy."

In a short time the horse thief crew were mounted, and adding the horses of the dead to their string, they drove the band of mustangs on toward the Gulf coast.

* * * * *

SO FAR as Dan Brent, horse breeder, went, the world was perfect. He was young and in the pink of condition. He had an appetite like a yearling bull's and the same nervous system—or lack of it. He could work and ride for days without sleep, and scarcely notice the lack of rest.

Born to Texas, Brent was doing just the sort of work he loved. To him, it was more like play than labor. He loved animals, especially horses, and with his partner, Lee Delaney, he had just started a small mustang ranch in the Nueces region of the Lone Star State.

Dan whistled cheerily as, in the cool of dawn, he saddled Banner, his beautiful black gelding with the white foreleg. The small shack in which he and Delaney lived was constructed of timber cut from the nearby woods, and had a thatched roof. They drank and otherwise used the clear water of a small brook issuing from the hills, and their stock had the creek into which it ran, a tributary of the main river.

There was good grass on the range, and Brent and Delaney owned enough sections to control all the water they would need, and room to expand, which was what they meant to do. With five hundred head of breeder stock, purchased with wages saved from working as bronc busters and cowboys—plus lucky winnings at gambling tables—Brent and Delaney would not market any horses for three or four years. They would wait until they had enough, through natural in-

crease, to maintain a full herd.

"Yes, suh, Lee, nobody ever had better prospects 'n you and me," declared Brent to his partner, as he cinched up his saddle. "We were mighty smart Injuns to go in this business for ourselves."

"Pat me on the back, too," Delaney, a heavy-set, easy-going fellow, grinned and said.

Left to himself, Delaney might have kept right on working for others, but with the ambitious, energetic Brent to prod him, he had come into the partnership.

His skin had been tanned by the wind and strong light of the Southwest, and he had big, capable hands. Everybody liked Brent on sight and kept liking him, too, after they came to know him. He had one of those cheerful natures which act like a magnet in attracting others.

Delaney gave him a hand as he fastened a pack saddle on a gentled horse used as a carrier of supplies. Brent was going to Whichway, the nearest settlement, for some things they needed. The town stood on the river, at the only good ford within miles. It

JIM HATFIELD

"You work on that corral fence while I'm gone, Lee," said Brent. "We got plenty to do here, before we can say loaf."

"Bueno, pardner," Lee said, and Dan Brent nodded.

Brent had light, crisp hair and smiling blue eyes, with creases of good humor radiating from the corners. He was a big man and strong, a man who looked virile even in the faded gray shirt and thorn-scratched chaps he wore. His half-boots were fitted with long silver spurs. On his head was a large, expensive Stetson with a curved brim.

could be seen from this horse ranch when it was not misty. But, once out of the low hills, swamps and other natural barriers cut off a direct approach, so it was necessary to ride a long detour to reach the road which led to the Gulf coast on one hand and into Texas on the other.

There were several large ranches within a hundred miles of the new outfit. Among them was the A C, which everybody called the "Ace," belonging to Adam Caruthers. This was only a two-hour run on horseback from Brent's, to the west. It was to such

customers that Brent and Delaney hoped to sell mustangs when they were ready to sell.

The sun was rising and there were long, purple cloud streaks athwart the horizon.

"It'll rain by night, Dan," observed Lee as Brent mounted.

"I'll be home before it strikes," replied Brent. "Anyways, I ain't made of sugar."

Delaney blinked at the sky. "Ain't yuh?" he drawled. "I had an idee that little gal at the Ace thought so."

Brent glanced sharply at his partner but then smiled. Such friends had privileges not permitted others.

"She's mighty purty," he said, "Spirited, too. Wish I thought yuh were right—I mean, about her approvin' of me. I ain't been able to find out much, for shore."

"Yuh were always slow with the girls, Dan," observed Lee. "I should give yuh some lessons."

"You old Casanova, you!"

Teasing was always in order between the partners.

Dan Brent, mounted on Banner, and with the lead rope around the saddle-born, turned toward the rough trail which would take him to the red-clay road.

"I might come back by way of the Ace, Lee," he called.

"I don't blame yuh," answered Lee Delaney. "But watch yore scalp."

Delaney stood there, watching him go. Then he went to the barn to get tools, hammer, nails and ax, and get to work on the new corral. . . .

THE first drops of the predicted rainstorm were falling as Dan Brent reached home. The sun was out of sight behind the storm clouds, and a damp wind blew. He hurried to get the pack-horse inside the barn so the supplies he had brought from Whichway would not get wet.

Darkness was about an hour away. Brent had reached the settlement, made his purchases at Tate's General Store and Saloon, and then, bypassing the lane which led back home, and gone on to visit at the A C Ranch. The hours had sped by. Miss Philomena Caruthers, daughter of the boss, Adam Caruthers, was possessed of a charm which made time seem far too short when in her company.

Brent unsaddled both horses and turned them into the nearby pen. The rain was coming down harder. The wind felt as wet as water as he ran to the shack, the door of which stood open.

He expected to find his partner waiting for him, but as he threw down his bundle of goods he saw that the cabin was empty. A bench had been upset and a small steel box where they kept their papers and what little spare cash they had lay open on the dirt floor.

"Hey, Lee!" sang out Brent. There was no answer.

But it was the strong-box, lying there, with papers scattered about, which sent the first thrill of anxiety through Dan Brent. Throwing a slicker over his broad shoulders he turned to snatch a shotgun off the wooden pegs driven into the wall. But the crude rack was empty. The rifles which usually were there were gone.

Brent checked his Colt, which was in his holster, and hurried outside.

He had been at the barn, so he went the other way, along a path toward the large corral, an enclosed pasture to hold their mustangs near home, for the breeders were too valuable for them to run free. Later on, when they had more stock, they had meant to use more range.

Past the jut of the hill, Brent saw the corral gate. It stood open and he couldn't see any horse shapes through the rain.

But he saw his partner, Lee Delaney, not far from the gate, and a hammer, bucket of nails and ax near him. Delaney lay on his back, the water streaming off his still face and body. He was dead, his flesh already cooled. There were several bullets in him, and one, through the heart, had been enough to kill. Around him were several empty pistol shells, although his own holster was empty and the gun was not in his hand or near him.

The dirt around the spot was turning into gumbo but the stricken Brent, icy sorrow in his soul, could see the deep indentations made by high-heeled riding boots, many of them. And there were signs that the horses had been driven out of the gate by the killers and thieves.

"Cuss 'em!" choked Brent.

Words were tame to him then. Only action, retaliation against the guilty, could begin to serve.

"They—they must have shot him while he was workin'," he groaned. "No warnin'."

He figured that perhaps Delaney, working on the fence near the gate, had been wounded, had drawn his pistol and fought until the horse thieves had finished him. A

As Hatfield fired, frightened outlaws were galloping to escape (CHAPTER VII)

sad end to poor Delaney's and Brent's own ambitions.

CHAPTER II

Horse Thieves Again

GOOD-NATURED as Dan Brent normally was, he had the Texan's combative spirit when set upon. He was boiling with fury, the desire to avenge his friend. He ran back to the barn, the damp air filling into his powerful lungs, and quickly saddled Banner.

The stolen horses had been driven out the lane, to the main road. They must have come through not too long before, Brent thought, while he was at the A C that afternoon.

The rain threatened to wash out the tracks, but he got to the main road in time to check the turnoff. The mustangs, driven by the thieves, had swung eastward, toward Whichway and the Gulf. Brent cursed the rain, for it was driving down harder and would turn the red clay into soupy mud in which all sign would be lost.

This was the way he had come that morning, on his way to buy supplies. Then he had been untroubled, filled with thoughts of how good life was, anticipating the visit to town, and later the call at the A C, where Philomena lived. Now he was pressed, desperate, overcome by gloom.

The clay road dipped down, and there were woods and thick brush, much of it thorned, on either side. The land was wild and, because of the swamps, there were no homes along the highway until the high spot where Whichway stood would be reached.

Water streamed off Brent's slicker, ran down the neck of his shirt. It dripped off Banner as the strong black gelding trotted at good speed through the muck, hoofs sucking and sloshing. On Brent's wide-brimmed Stetson, the pelting drops sounded to him like rain on a roof.

Banner suddenly shied, throwing his handsome head to the right, slewing around. It was so unexpected that the trained rider shifted in his leather seat and his body leaned off to one side. This saved Brent's life, for the keener senses of the animal had caught a warning. The roaring gun from the thick brush clump at the edge of the road startled Banner, and the gelding whirled and ran full-tilt back on the slippery road. A second shot missed.

But Dan Brent himself failed to hear either explosion. The first bullet had cut through his Stetson and grooved his scalp. Blood, thinned by rain, streamed from under his strapped hat. Slumped down, toes in the tapped stirrups, shirt front caught in the high horn, Brent rode on without knowing it. . . .

When he came to, Brent was lying under a brown blanket in a bunk and a beautiful angel was hovering over him. At least that was his impression as he groaned and tried to figure what he had done to get so near heaven. As his senses cleared he realized it was Philomena Caruthers who was bending above him. She was bathing his aching head with a clean cloth and warm water from a large pan.

Her raven hair was held in place by a blue ribbon. Slim, strong and spirited, she was a real prize, a beauty. Brent was aware of that even in this half-dazed moment.

"Phil!" he murmured.

"Oh, now you can talk!" she said quickly, drawing back. He thought she sighed with relief.

"Takes more'n a crease in the knob to down a Texas man," growled Adam Caruthers, her father, who stood behind the pretty girl. "By jaloppergee, he'll be out in two days huntin' for more trouble, the young kazooka."

Brent grinned faintly as he heard those gibberish words, for he understood them. He knew Adam Caruthers' idiosyncrasy so well. Caruthers, who adored his wife, had tried to give up using profanity, for her sake. So he had made up his own brand of strange oaths. This allowed him to express himself without wounding the sensibilities of his wife.

Caruthers was a big man, a Texas rancher, well-to-do when the price of beef was up. He was large of heart and hand, as well as of body. He had a heavy head, with thick brown hair, and a luxuriant brown mustache of which he was inordinately proud. He had wide-set dark eyes—and these Philomena had inherited, but she had her mother's slim figure.

"I—I'm mighty glad to be here," Brent said to the rancher weakly. "But how in—how'd I make it?"

"Couple of the boys was ridin' to Whichway for a little evenin' spree and they bumped into yuh. Yore hoss was grazin' by the road in the rain. They fetched yuh in,

yuh lucky pazunk."

Mrs. Caruthers came into the room now, carrying a fresh kettle of hot water. She was pretty, still slim, and capable as such rancher wives had to be.

"Oh, he's come to!" she said, pleased. "That's a good sign. Let me feel his pulse again, Philomena."

"I was sayin', Mother," said Caruthers, "yuh couldn't finish that galoot with a pole-ax!"

"Yes, he's already recovering from the shock," agreed Eleanor Caruthers, after holding Brent's burly wrist for a time. "Suppose we turn down the lamp and let him sleep now. That will be the best thing for him."

"Wait!" cried Brent. "I wanted to tell yuh what happened, Mr. Caruthers. Hoss thieves killed my pardner, Lee Delaney. They run off with our mustangs. I was tryin' to trail 'em when I was drygulched."

"Well, I'll be—galunked!" Caruthers somehow managed to keep from bursting into actual profanity.

"Now, now, Dan," soothed Mrs. Caruthers, patting the young man's flushed cheek. "Don't excite yourself. You must rest and sleep. There's nothing can be done about it all tonight. We'll see in the morning."

"But—"

"Do as Mother says, Dan," ordered Philomena. "She knows best."

"That's right, yuh young zwipe." Caruthers grinned, then added, "If I jump when she cracks the whip, I reckon a pockalatin' bull calf like you can mind her, too. I'll send some of the boys over to yore place to look after Lee. You go to sleep.

"All right," agreed Brent wearily. He did feel tired.

But as he closed his eyes it was not so much of poor Lee he was thinking as it was of the Caruthers family. Mighty fine people. Eleanor Caruthers was a pioneer woman who had made a home in the wild Texas rangeland for her family, and it was really she who had made the A C successful. Dan Brent was in awe of her, though, even more than he was of Adam Caruthers. And Philomena certainly had learned a great deal, watching her mother handle the powerful, opinionated Adam and other strong-minded range men.

Finally Brent dropped off to sleep, soothed by the sounds made by the family around the big ranchhouse. . . .

Next morning the rain had stopped, and the sun had come up, warming and drying out the land. From the window, Brent could see the sweep of grassy earth down to the river. In the distance, steers bawled, and the stamp of mustangs could be heard. Birds winged and sang in the trees along the stream banks. Brent smelled fresh coffee. As he sat up, intending to pull on his boots and buckle on his gun-belt, Philomena came from the main room.

"Ah-ah," she warned. "Mother says you must stay in bed today, Dan."

"But shucks, I'm in the pink, Filly!" objected Brent. "I got to get back to my place and see about Lee's burial and all."

"Father sent some of the men over there last night, as he told you he would, and he's already left for your place this morning. He'll see to everything. You lie quiet and I'll fetch you some coffee."

LATER in the day, Adam Caruthers rode back. He and his men had buried Lee Delaney, and closed the shack. He told Brent that the rain had washed away all of the tracks left by the thieves running off the mustangs.

"No use to take it too hard, Dan," said Caruthers, with philosophical calm, as he smoked his pipe in Brent's room that evening. "Yuh're young, and yuh got yore health. Yuh can come to work for me here, if yuh want to, and mebbe look forward to startin' again later. I got some mustangs runnin' loose in the hills west of here that I'd like took care of, and there's always plenty doin' around the ranch."

Caruthers liked Dan Brent, although he had the father's natural careful eye toward his only child's suitors or possible suitors.

The Ace was a good-sized ranch. Caruthers employed twenty cowboys in season and shipped a lot of beef. Besides the white-washed adobe ranchhouse, a large, rambling building, there was a bunkhouse, stables, corrals, a springhouse, corncrib and other sheds. They lived well, for Eleanor and Philomena were excellent housekeepers and cooks.

A tall cowpuncher in black leather, his face grimy and lined with weariness from a long ride, came through the open front door and paused at the entrance to the bedroom where Brent and Caruthers were.

"Say, boss," he drawled, "we checked up all day. Looks like the best of our mustangs have been took from the hills. We seen some old tracks that look like thieves had drove

'em. We figger some prime beefs have been stole, too. That's how we work it out!"

Caruthers' calm, so philosophical over Brent's losses, burst with explosive violence as he heard he had been robbed.

"Why, those bangalatin' snufftillers! I'll—" The air grew sulphurous as he leaped to his feet.

AT DAWN next morning, Adam Caruthers led fifteen armed men, including Dan Brent, on the trail of the busy thieves who had struck the range. But rain had washed out most tracks, and those which the A C punchers had come upon were days old.

They had only Brent's idea to go on, since he knew the outlaws had turned toward the Gulf. Before noon, they had reached Whichway, the little settlement which commanded the river ford, and here they paused for information.

Swamps and quicksands along the river made the ford the only good crossing for many miles. Roads converged to it. There were a few small shacks, but the dominant building of Whichway was Bill Tate's General Store & Saloon. It was made of cottonwood timber, roughly whitewashed, and of a single story, but it rambled far back toward the open carriage shed and stable behind it. On one side was the store where groceries, supplies for ranches, clothing, and ammunition were sold. At the right was the saloon, to which the A C contingent repaired.

Tate, a heavy, stout man, with sparse black hair and a curved nose, was behind the crude bar. He had a storekeeper's once-white canvas apron over his stained trousers and blue shirt, and his seamed, bearded cheek was bulged out by a tobacco cud.

"Howdy, Tate!" sang out Caruthers. "We're huntin' them thieves. They been takin' my stock, hosses and cows, and we aim to come up with 'em and give 'em whatfor, cuss their valvalatin' souls!"

A big man, with protruding bony joints, turned sharp black eyes on Caruthers, and edged closer to the rancher, fetching his glass of whisky with him along the bar. He put his elbow on the board top, and pulled at the thick forelock of black hair which drooped at one side of his sharply angular head. He had taken off his dark felt hat and laid it on the bar, so it could be seen that his large ears wiggled as he slid back his scalp. He had a strong, bony jaw and a firm mouth.

As he turned to Caruthers, they saw that to his dark shirt was pinned a U.S. marshal's official badge, the eagle riding atop it. His black pants were tucked into silver-spurred boots.

"Name's Slade, suh, Morton Slade, at yore service," he said, and quietly tapped the marshal's badge with a long forefinger. "I been sent down thisaway on account of many complaints, no doubt concernin' the same bunch who've stolen yore stock. My commission."

He flipped open a white paper, his official warrant. Caruthers glanced briefly at the paper and nodded.

"Glad yuh're here, Marshal Slade. We can use yore help. There was another U.S. marshal come through here—name of Hogan. He's dropped out of sight along with some fellers who were helpin' him chase a bunch of outlaws. I s'pose yuh're huntin' for him, too?"

Slade nodded grimly.

They talked and drank, and after a time another party of cowmen arrived. The leader was Oscar Wilson, a wide-bodied, older Texan whose range lay many miles west of the A C. Caruthers knew Wilson, and soon learned that he was on the same errand as Brent and the Ace riders. Wilson, on discovering that he had lost a great deal of stock, had hurried out in the hope of tracking the thieves.

"They're workin' the whole range a long ways back," growled Dan Brent. "Must be a big, powerful gang, gents."

No one answered. But each man present knew that death and destruction had come upon the Texas land.

CHAPTER III

On the Double

CAPTAIN WILLIAM McDOWELL, the aging chief of the Texas Rangers, stalked his Austin office like a caged panther. If he had had nails clenched between what was left of his teeth, the outer halves of said nails would have tinkled to the boards of the floor, for McDowell was that angry.

He awaited, and with not the slightest shred of patience, the arrival of his star officer, Ranger Jim Hatfield, for whom he had

called after collating the reports from the Nueces region of the Lone Star State. Too old to leap on his charger and go forth to battle the evil elements, with the danger trails many years behind him, McDowell had to depend on others to enforce the laws of Texas.

He had never got over the habit of feeling personally affronted at injustice and the crimes of outlaws against those he looked upon as his children and charges, the people of his state. It hurt his soul, tortured him.

"The nerve of 'em," he snarled, his old eyes flashing sparks.

After all, his superiors held him responsible. They might even get to saying—in whispers, perhaps, not daring to say so to his face—that Bill McDowell was growing too old to handle such a big stretch of wild territory.

He turned, cursing, as a soft tread sounded at the office door. A tall man came in, a man whose appearance soothed McDowell's boiling soul.

"Hatfield! Yuh made it pronto!"

Jim Hatfield stood well over six feet in his clean range clothing—blue shirt, fresh bandanna at his throat, leather riding breeches, [illegible] half-boots with big spurs. His curving Stetson was canted on his handsome, black-haired head. Power, physical ability and might exuded from the rangy body.

He had broad shoulders, tapering to the slim waist of a true fighter. There hung his twin Colts, big revolvers with which he was most expert, guns he could whip up and fire with the speed of legerdemain.

His face was rugged, but attractive in its manliness. His wide mouth softened the Ranger's grim expression, and his slim hands hung easily at his hips. His eyes were gray-green, alert, clear.

Bronzed by the wind and storms and sun of the great Southwest, Jim Hatfield had a mighty quality which attracted men and women, made them trust and lean on him. And he had a real mind, too, McDowell was aware, a brain able to comprehend delicate situations, appraise them and then unerringly strike.

When they had sat down together, McDowell began to tell of the worries gnawing at his heart.

"There's a mighty tough gang operatin' through the southeast section, Hatfield.

As the man kicked open the door and jumped out, Hatfield sent a shot after him (CHAPTER X)

They're stealin' hosses, and some cows. Killed a young hoss rancher named Lee Delaney and stole the mustangs belongin' to Delaney and his pardner, one Dan Brent, who's workin' now at the A C, a spread owned by Adam Caruthers. Other cowmen down that way been yelpin', too, havin' lost hosses and steers. Several fellers have disappeared—six, to be exact. It's said they tried to track these thieves from the interior and they ain't been heard of since."

McDowell cleared his throat. He lowered his voice a bit, as he went on.

"Yuh savvy that with the carpetbaggers just leavin', and martial law over, it's up to Texas to keep her own chin clean. We're just gittin' back on our own feet. You know that. We got problems, and we must solve 'em ourselves. Now, among the missin' is a United States deputy marshal, name of Lewis Hogan. I got a query on him from the Federal authorities. They want to know can we handle it or shall they come in?"

"The Rangers'll handle it," Hatfield said quietly.

He made a few notes, of names, to stow in his retentive mind, and checked with McDowell on the big sectional maps on the office walls.

"Whichway is the nearest settlement," he said. "I been through there. It don't amount to much. On the way to the Gulf coast."

As Hatfield took his leave, McDowell said: "Be shore to check on Hogan, the missin' marshal. I got to have the right answer for 'em, Jim."

McDowell watched from the window as the tall Ranger went to his horse, a strong, golden gelding, saddled, and with packs and carbine ready. Goldy, who carried Hatfield on his vital, delicate missions against lawbreakers in Texas, was a beautiful animal, trained to the work, loving the wild trails just as much as Hatfield did.

They took the south road, out of Austin, and in the window old McDowell stood, nostalgia clutching at his heart. He wished he, too, could strike the danger road again....

TO REACH Whichway by the shortest possible route, Hatfield was forced to head east for a time. He came in on the road from the Gulf, crossing to the settlement on the west bank by the ford. The river was known as a treacherous one, filled with quicksands, and swamps cut off its banks in many places.

The golden sorrel, after making a swift run from Austin, shook the water from his gleaming sides, his legs and barrel which were wet from the crossing. The late afternoon sun was in Hatfield's eyes as he swung Goldy toward the saloon and general store, and dropped the sorrel's reins over the hitch-rack.

Dismounting, he entered the saloon, his spurs tinkling faintly on the earthen floor. It was cooler inside, and darker, for the windows were narrow and the glass panes dirty. A glance took in what there was of Tate's Saloon—the bar made of rough boards set on barrels, a shelf with bottles of red-eye and glasses, a couple of rough tables and benches at the other side.

"Howdy, suh."

He nodded, as he saw the bartender looking at him.

A couple of men were sitting at the tables. They looked like cowboys. The barkeeper a man of around forty, was fat, with a curved nose and unshaven cheeks. One side of his face bulged from a cud of tobacco.

"Afternoon, stranger." There was an inquiring note in the man's whining voice. "I'm Bill Tate. This here's my place. Step up."

Hatfield rang a silver dollar on the bar.

"I'll have the usual, Tate," he said.

Bill Tate dropped the dollar into a pocket in his soiled canvas apron, and pushed across a bottle of whisky and a thick glass. He put his arms on the bar, leaning there as he smiled in friendly fashion at the Ranger.

"Looks like yuh'd come a long ways, mister," he said. "I didn't catch yore handle?"

"I didn't give it," replied the Ranger at once. "But it's Hale, Jim Hale. I'm from Red River way. Figgered I'd see if the wind blows any warmer down in these parts. The winter gets mighty cold up there."

"That's right." Tate nodded. "Yuh lookin' for a ridin' job, eh?"

"Yep. You savvy any big spreads that might need a hand?"

"You could try the A C—it's called the Ace. Belongs to Adam Caruthers. It's three, four hours' ride from here. Just foller the west road and yuh'll see his brand sign on his lane."

"Bueno. Thanks for the tip. Here's how." Hatfield raised his glass.

The Ranger had the silver star on silver circle, emblem of the great organization he represented, snugged in a secret pocket under his shirt. But it was his method to enter a

case quietly, under some assumed guise, so that he might look over the situation before taking action.

Such a spot as Tate's would be a center of regional gossip, and what he had told the barkeeper should satisfy those who might be curious as to strangers arriving in the section. Having come on the double to Whichway and the affected part of Texas, Hatfield would now begin his investigation.

"I'd like to take care of my hoss, Tate," he said.

"Shore. Help yorself. There's a stable boy in back'll give yuh a hand."

Hatfield went outside, and rubbed down the golden sorrel. When Goldy had cooled off, he gave the mount a grain feed and left him in an open shed, unsaddled.

Whichway, commanding the best ford within miles, stood on a natural elevation above high-water mark. Rutted trails branched from it, to the southwest and other points of the compass, but the main road was the east-west highway. Travelers on this route were bound to pass the settlement, unless they detoured for a long way.

After seeing to Goldy's comfort, the Ranger had a meal in the saloon. Tate sold cheese, bread and canned goods from his store, where he had a Mexican woman and a lad to wait on customers while he tended the bar. It was a satisfying repast for the tall officer, who was used to hardtack and jerked beef on the trail.

As he gave Goldy time to rest and digest his meal of grain, Hatfield observed riders who paused in the settlement. Several were cowhands, obviously in on errands from ranches to the west. They had a drink or two before riding back with their supplies.

Night was close at hand when a man on a fine chestnut gelding splashed through the ford and came up to Tate's, dropping his reins over the hitch-rack outside. He ducked under it and entered the saloon. Hatfield looked him over, as he had the others who had appeared.

HE SAW the United States marshal's star pinned to the rangy man's thick, dark shirt. The fellow stepped to the bar. He was large, with bony, protruding joints, and sharp, alert black eyes. His black felt hat was pushed back on his sweated head, and a forelock of thick hair could be seen, drooped at his temple. Red mud had spattered his trousers which were tucked into spurred half-boots.

"Howdy, Marshal Slade!" sang out Tate, hurrying to fetch a bottle and glass. "Where yuh headin' this evenin'?"

"On my way through," replied the Federal official. His quick black eyes flitted from one drinker to another, including Hatfield.

"Ten to one this Federal marshal is down here huntin' Hogan!" the Ranger thought.

Such an officer might prove a valuable ally at the proper moment, but Hatfield was working incognito and did not wish to announce his true identity as yet. There was some rivalry, too, between Federal and State lawmen, which McDowell had mentioned.

"Meet Jim Hale, Marshal Slade," Tate said. "He's from Red River way, lookin' for a ridin' job. Yuh savvy any?"

Marshal Slade held out a big, red-knuckled hand and stared into Hatfield's gray-green eyes.

"Glad to meet yuh, Hale. I get around a lot, in my business. There's some big spreads fifty mile west of here that are takin' on hands. They didn't spare the material when they molded you, did they?"

The Ranger smiled good-humoredly.

"No suh, Marshal Slade. I am purty big. But I can get around okay."

"Have a drink," invited Slade.

The Federal marshal was friendly, and willing to chat. The price of beef, the state of the nation, and other interesting matters were taken up and disposed of. The bartender, Bill Tate, lighted a taper and went around to the two brass-bowled oil lamps hanging from the rafters, for night was at hand.

"I'll have to be ridin', boys," Morton Slade finally said, finishing his drink. "See yuh agin."

He went off, heading west on the main road.

"S'pose I could find the Ace turnoff in the dark, Tate?" asked Hatfield.

"Shore. Yuh can't miss it if yuh look sharp. Tell Caruthers I sent yuh. He's a friend of mine."

Hatfield had more bread and cheese, a couple of cans of peaches and several cups of hot coffee which the Mexican woman had made. Glowing with a sense of well-being, he paid his score and took his leave of the stout, bearded Tate. He saddled the golden sorrel and started from Whichway, intending to reach the A C, Caruthers' ranch, before bedtime.

CHAPTER IV

Signals From the River

IT WAS not too dark to ride, with the silver moon coming up and the stars bright in the sky. Hatfield glanced back, as the road slowly mounted out of the river valley. The yellow lights of the saloon, with a couple of shacks in which lamps burned, made the place look cozy from a distance.

The slope grew steeper, as he reached the ridges and hills overlooking the valley. From a high point, he looked around from the saddle, as Goldy strained up the grade. He could still see the lights of Whichway.

Then, not far north of the saloon, which was the largest of the town structures, he caught a sudden flash of light.

He paused, stopping the gelding, and simply from curiosity watched the spot. Again he saw a quick flash, than a longer one.

"Signal lantern," he decided. "Looks like it's near the river ford."

The Ranger sat his horse for a time. To whom could the signals, if that's what they were, be directed? He found a point from which he could see the black bulk of the adjoining hills, and kept sweeping the distances with his keen eyes.

Suddenly he saw a pinpoint of light, off to the north of the east-west road on which he had been riding. It went out, then came on again. It repeated the quick flashes and longer spaces of the signals from the river.

"Interestin'," he murmured to the golden sorrel. "Who in tarnation blazes is signalin' this time of night, and why? From the ford to the hills."

Not only was his natural curiosity piqued but his professional lawman suspicions were aroused. Why should honest men be flashing the message, whatever it was?

The signaling had ceased. He had only a rough idea of the source of those which had come from the wooded hills, but he was certain that the first ones he had noted had come from the river ford, close to Whichway.

"We'll have to check up, Goldy," he muttered. "It's too interestin' to pass up." He could make the A C in the morning.

He turned the sorrel and started back down the slope toward Whichway. But when he was on the level of the settlement he did not show himself in the lighted area.

Tate's was still open, although the neighboring shacks were dark. He found a patch of brush, off the red-clay road, and dismounting, waited patiently.

Patience was a necessary asset in his profession. So while he waited an hour passed, with only the warm wind rustling last year's dry seed pods, the call of night birds, and a mighty chorus of peepers in the swamps to disturb the peace of the night. A couple of horsemen, drinkers from Tate's saloon, trotted by, evidently on the way home.

It was nearly midnight when Tate's lamps were turned off, and Whichway lay quiet in the darkness. The moon was high, giving off a silvery light, but the shadows were black.

The Ranger began to wonder if he had wasted the evening.

After another hour he grew sure that he must have read too much significance into the few flashes of the lanterns he had seen.

"Reckon we might as well mosey along," he began, and then grew quickly alert.

A sharp sound came on the southwest wind, and he identified it as a shod hoof clacking on a loose stone in the road. Soon two riders appeared in the moonlit shaft of the winding clay highway. He couldn't make out anything about them save their general shape—and a glint of moon on carbine barrels they held before them.

They went past, not speaking, toward the settlement and river ford.

Ears straining, Hatfield listened. After a while he caught a faint stamping, which grew steadily louder.

"Hosses!" he mused. "Big bunch of 'em." They were being driven toward the river.

Armed men, plenty of them, were driving the mustangs. They began passing the point where the Ranger was hidden. In the faint light he could see the maned animals, snorting and stamping nervously, as they pushed and crowded along on the road.

Now the two men who had ridden ahead rode back, calling softly to the drovers:

"All clear, boys. Push 'em through."

There were hundreds of mustangs in the herd.

"Stole, I reckon," decided Hatfield. "They keep watch at the ford and signal when it's safe to cross the river. This is a piece of luck."

COMING down the long slope into the valley, the woods and the cuts through

gravel banks had made it possible to keep the mustangs from spreading out. But at the point where Hatfield had turned aside, there was a widening, and a bunch of spooky horses suddenly whirled and came galloping past the brush clump in which he crouched.

The nearest drovers swore hotly and a couple spurred after the runaways which, catching Goldy's and Hatfield's scent, whinnied and veered off. One of the pursuing riders passed within three yards of the crouched Ranger without seeing him, on the other side of the bushes. But the second practically ran Hatfield down, as the Ranger jumped aside to escape the driving mustang's shod forehoofs.

"What the devil!" screeched the startled man. "Hey, boys! Here's somebody hid in the bushes!"

He whirled to a stop, his horse's hoofs sliding. He could see the sorrel standing there, and the bulk of the man on the ground.

"What is it, Jake—what's wrong?" shouted the other rider, turning in his leather.

Jake's carbine was moving. The moonlight glinted on the oiled metal barrel as the drover sought to cover Hatfield.

With the blinding yet accurate speed of which Jim Hatfield was capable, he drew his Colt, the hammer back under his thumb as the weapon cocked by its own rising weight. There was no time to argue. He had to shoot to save himself from capture, probably death.

The carbine flamed but the Colt had spoken first, banging in the night. Jake caught the Ranger lead in the chest and his rifle muzzle was not quite far enough around as his finger convulsively squeezed. Hatfield heard the shriek of the man's bullet, and the quick zip as it cut the bushes and plugged into the soft ground. The wind blew a scent of acrid powder smoke into his flared nostrils.

He was still half-crouched, his booted feet spread wide. His gray-green eyes gleamed darkly cold in the moonlight.

Jake's mustang, startled by the flaring pistol in his face, reared high, and threw the dead rider from the leather. Jake fell, crumpled nearby, and the horse ran off.

The man who had come with Jake in pursuit of the bunch of mustangs, had ripped his reins and pivoted his big mount. He saw the flaming guns, saw his partner fall.

"This way, boys—pronto!" he howled. "Jake's hit! This way!"

He was in the Ranger's line of retreat, blocking Hatfield from leaping on Goldy and trying to escape in the bushes. Replying shouts, the crashing of brush and pounding hoofs, told Hatfield that most of the gang had swung to deal with the opposition he had set up. He had but a few moments in which to get started or he would be surrounded, overwhelmed. He had no doubt that he had run into some of the horse thieves who were plaguing the territory.

Jake's companion opened fire, even as Hatfield shifted, reaching with his left hand for Goldy's reins. The outlaw was using a Colt, and its bull voice roared gruffly, twice, the slugs too close to the Ranger for comfort. Forced to take care of the insistent killer, Hatfield let go again. He had a steady stance, and his brain was cool as ice. He never grew flurried in battle but thought clearly, unerringly.

"Hey!"

The gunman's shriek ended in a gasp of pain. He had felt the Ranger lead, and he dropped his pistol as he slumped in his saddle. No longer guided, his horse ran off from the blazing Ranger Colt.

The main body of horse thieves was al-

[*Turn page*]

most upon Hatfield now, cursing, furious enemies who would riddle him from every angle. He leaped on Goldy, and spurted into the brush, zigzagging.

"Here's Jake—dead!" he heard a man cry.

"There goes the killer!" yelled another.

Wild bullets sought him.

"After him! Catch him!"

They came on the Ranger's trail and he was forced to ride, letting Goldy pick the route. The escaped mustangs had come this way.

To outride his pursuers was Hatfield's one idea. There was no trail to follow, but Goldy picked avenues and openings in the scattered bush.

Hatfield glanced back over a hunched shoulder. Unable to see the riders, yet the wind brought their shouts and he knew they had not given up the chase, determined as they were to catch whoever had shot their two companions. They had spread out, too, as they hunted him.

On a stretch of fair ground, Hatfield would have had no worries, for Goldy could outrun any mustang that had ever bucked. But now the sorrel, delicately expert at finding his footing, suddenly veered and slowed. He took another tack, to the left. Looking up, Hatfield could see the loom of a vast, steep cliff, studded with dwarf pines and bush, with sharp outcroppings of sheer rock. To the right and ahead, bushes grew.

"We can never make it up that wall, Goldy," he muttered.

A DIP, filled with boulders, sent the sorrel back again to the right, hunting for a path through. Nearer and nearer came the yells of the outlaws.

Goldy almost stopped, and the Ranger heard the sound of the sorrel's hoofs in wet mud. Through a gap, he sighted the gleam of the moon on still water, a swamp. Goldy swung and went north, but slowly, picking each step.

For a time, the footing was good enough, but then his hoofs began sinking in muck. When Goldy picked up a hoof, it made a sucking sound. All about, save on the west where the steep cliffs loomed, the Ranger saw little pools of swamp water.

Then he sighted a horse shape, and another. The mustangs which had run off from the herd had been stopped by the water, and were standing in small bunches, some cropping at the tall swamp grasses, other pulling at leafy branches of the brush.

Hatfield could not turn and ride back, for the pursuers were spread out and watching for such a move. And they no doubt knew the locality better than he did, realized he would be blocked by the swamps. They were looking for him although they, too, had been forced to slow down in the morass.

To the right, a large lagoon cut Hatfield off. Ahead was not much better, with gleaming black pools broken by hummocks from which grew bushes and stunted trees. He dismounted and, knowing he must work fast, he ran as he led Goldy over toward the cliffs.

Huge boulders, thrown down by gravity through erosion, blocked further progress along the foot of the bluff, and from the slightly higher point he could see that arms of the great swamp reached to the base. In the night, quicksands were a great menace, and he knew he had come to the [illegible] of the ride.

Hastily he loosened his cinches and pulled the saddle off the sorrel. Patting Goldy, he whispered:

"Keep away from 'em, Goldy."

Goldy started away, obedient to his commands. Hatfield lifted the saddle and dropped it into a deep hole between the boulders. Then, on foot, he crawled across the rocks until he had found a space into which he could squeeze himself. His breath came hard from the exertion he had undergone.

Colt in hand, he squatted in the hole, waiting. At least he could hold them off, sell his life dearly, perhaps make it too expensive for them to take.

Hardly had he set himself, than he heard their voices, close at hand.

"Which way'd the fool go?" someone growled.

"Don't know, but he can't get much farther. The swamps reach all the way in from the river a little ways on."

They kept getting false alarms from the mustangs which, having run as far as they could, stood quietly, moving only when someone came close.

Goldy, unsaddled, had mingled with the mustangs and was only a horse shape in the darkness.

Hatfield kept quiet, out of sight.

"Light a lantern," ordered a gruff voice. The little yellow flame came up, and they searched the damp earth. "Plenty of hoof tracks, but which one is his'n?"

"Look over thataway, Tim—try that bunch of rocks, Lew."

High-heeled boots and spurs, the slippery mud underfoot, made the men curse furiously as they slid on the rocks. A couple came within a few yards of the Ranger's hole, and he tensed, ready to open fire if they looked in. But one fell, barking his shin on the edge of a boulder, and swore as he rose up and turned away.

They hunted for half an hour.

"Come on!" the gruff voice of the leader said then. "Mebbe he's ducked into the water. We ain't got any more time to waste. Drive them mustangs back."

Millions of peepers, frogs and toads and insects, kept up a shrill din. Faint splashings sounded, creatures in the swamp. Hatfield listened, hearing the noises of the gang rounding up the mustangs and driving them back to the solid ground and the road.

"Get that one over there, Fred."

Perhaps they were speaking of Goldy, for after a while, an exasperated voice cried:

"He dodges like a coyote, Sam! Let's join the others. It's only one hoss."

"Yeah, let's go. We'll miss the boat."

CHAPTER V

Ace

HATFIELD knew too much about man-hunting to venture forth at once. He made himself as comfortable as possible, and waited. They might leave a man or two hidden to watch for him when he came out. He rolled a quirly, keeping the light carefully cupped and below the surface in the crevice, and enjoyed a smoke.

After a time he dozed, snatching catnaps as he leaned against the damp rock. Above he could see the pale moon and stars, and the boulders cut off the wind so that he kept warm enough.

In the first light of the dawn, the Ranger peered from his hiding place. He studied every possible nearby point, which might contain an enemy, but all seemed to be clear. Pulling himself up, he crawled, slipping now and then, back across the boulders. His saddle was still stowed in the other space.

He whistled, joining the chorus of pipers from the swamp. After a while, he saw Goldy coming toward him, in answer to his call. The sorrel was caked with mud but was unhurt. He had eluded the thieves, and spent the night grazing at the edge of the morass.

Keeping a weather eye out, Hatfield saddled up, and started slowly back toward the highway. He kept a Colt in one hand, and cocked, for the horse thieves might have wanted him enough to have left drygulchers nearby. They had picked up the dead Jake, and the Ranger saw only the broken spaces in the grass where the fight had occurred. Trails of horses could be seen in the growth.

He reached the road without being fired upon, and sat the golden sorrel, staring over at Whichway. Smoke issued from the rear chimney of the store building. No doubt Tate's Mexican wife was cooking breakfast for her lord and master.

"Cup of coffee would go good," he mused, then shook his head. "I reckon not. Nothin' to swear to, but them signals come from mighty close to Tate's place last night. I'll check up on him later."

He would eat at the A C, Caruthers' spread, the Ranger decided. Swinging the sorrel up the hill, he started his journey, watching for signs of enemies. But apparently they had given him up as a bad job, and all gone on. He was sure they had crossed at Whichway and driven toward the Gulf.

The sun was well up when he rode along a clay road, which ran through grazing country—he sighted bunches of cattle in the distance—and paused at a lane off to the right. On a tree stump was nailed a brand sign, A C, with a wooden ace of diamonds decorating it, and an arrow, made of pine limbs, pointing toward the lane.

He took this, and after a short run crossed a shallow creek and went up the bank toward the collection of buildings which stood above high-water mark. It was a pretty site for a home, and the Ranger appreciatively nodded as he took in the Ace.

The house was large, of adobe brick whitewashed and gleaming. Bunkhouse, stables and corrals, springhouse and other outbuildings were in excellent repair. There was even a flower garden along the front porch, and the wind brought to him a delicious aroma of fresh-baked bread.

Breakfast was over. Cowpunchers had moved out on the range, for there was always work around such a place. A slim youth, the wrangler, was currying a black

mustang in the yard, a mustang which kept trying to kick him through the fence, but the wrangler was spry and eluded the lashing hoofs.

In a small corral past the stable, a bronc-buster was riding a wild horse which crow-hopped and gyrated, raising the dirt high into the air. A girl in a blue dress and white apron, and with her raven hair held in place by a ribbon, was in the back yard, hanging some washing to dry in the warm sun.

Hatfield got down, and dropped his reins. He walked over to the corral and leaned on the fence, watching the bronc-buster's expert ride. After a time, the mustang gave up bucking and stood still, head hanging wearily between his forelegs. The rider jumped off and vaulted the fence, grinning at Hatfield.

"Howdy, mister. Come on in and have a cup of coffee with me. That hoss plumb dried me out."

The bronc-buster had crisp light hair, damp with sweat under his strapped hat. His blue eyes twinkled with good humor. He was big and strong, wore a gray shirt, and his thick leather chaps showed much use.

"I'm Dan Brent," he said.

"Howdy, Brent," said the Ranger, who already had heard of Dan Brent. "My handle is Jim Hale. I was ridin' by and seen yore brand sign. Feller by the name of Tate down at Whichway said there might be a ridin' job open here."

Brent shrugged. "Yuh'll have to ask the big boss—that's Adam Caruthers."

THEY went to the back door, and Brent smiled at the pretty girl who was hanging out the washing. She was slim, but strong-looking, and she held her head with the spirit of a blooded animal. Her white teeth gleamed as she replied to Brent's grin.

"Say, Filly," asked Brent, "s'pose yore ma would skin me alive if I asked for another cup of coffee? This here gent ain't had any breakfast yet, either. Think yuh can fill him up? He's mighty big."

"Good morning, stranger," said Philomena. "You go right in and you'll be fed. As for you, Dan, Father says he's got to reduce your wages if you don't quit eating so much."

Brent thought that was funny and laughed, as he led Hatfield into the comfortable, roomy kitchen. Mrs. Caruthers was hard at work—there was seldom time for a ranch wife to idle. She smiled at Brent, and shook hands with the tall stranger.

"Sit down at the table, boys," she invited. "I have some hot coffee, and pancake batter left over from breakfast."

She was baking but paused to grease the large iron griddle and drop spoonfuls of yellow batter on the sizzling plate. She poured coffee into white china cups, set the big pot and the sugar bowl on the wooden table beside the two men. There was real cream, too, for they kept milch cows at the ranch.

"Oh me, oh my!" gloated Brent, licking his chops as a heaping plate of the golden-brown pancakes was set before them. "I could do this all day."

Philomena, the clothes all hung out to dry, had returned to the kitchen. She smiled at Brent's youthful enthusiasm over the food. Taking over the task of cooking the pancakes, she stood over the stove and for half an hour served one pile after another to Hatfield and Brent, who apparently were empty from the feet up.

It was easy enough to start Dan Brent talking, and Hatfield turned the conversation toward the trouble which had come upon the range.

"I heard tell in Whichway when I come through, that there'd been a bunch of hoss thieves in these parts," he said, to open the subject.

"That's right."

Brent swallowed a mouthful of pancakes, soaked with home-made butter and honey. "Been a terrible lot of trouble. Me, I lost my pardner, Lee Delaney, as fine an hombre as ever forked a bronc. And they run off five hundred head of breeder stock Lee and me had."

A little prodding, and Brent obliged with the full story, of his run to town, and to the A C, his return to find Delaney killed and the horses gone.

"Caruthers' men picked me up," he continued, "and fetched me here. We found that A C hosses had been run off as well. We tried to trail the outlaws but had no luck. They had too much of a start on us."

"Yore ranch is east of here, from the way yuh tell it," observed Hatfield.

"It was. I sold out. I was sick from losin' Delaney, and for another the place was no good without the mustangs. I been workin' for Caruthers since."

"You mean you're supposed to be working," broke in Philomena.

"Yuh can see how much appreciation I

get," said Brent, winking at Hatfield. It was also to be seen that he highly enjoyed the birl's banter, that it kept his spirits high.

"Now and again," went on Philomena, "he strolls out and tops a bronc. The rest of the time he sits in the kitchen and eats."

Behind the jesting, this girl and Brent were very much in earnest about one another, Hatfield decided.

"Who bought yore place?" inquired the Ranger, trying to finish his eighth cup of coffee. He bulged at the belt from so many pancakes. But he wondered at the quick sale of Brent's property. It had not been long since the mustangers had been robbed.

"Hombre by the handle of Ole Olsen. He chanced along and made me and offer, so I took it pronto."

"Local feller?"

"Nope. Never seen him before. He's from up Waco way—least, so he told me. He's goin' to breed hosses. The shack and corrals weren't worth much, and I let the place go cheap."

Hatfield was interested. He returned to the first tack.

"Just where was yore ranch, Brent?"

"Well, you come through Whichway, didn't yuh? Remember after yuh crossed the river and went through town, there was a long upgrade? Our trail turned off north and run along the top of the bluffs. We could see Whichway when it was clear, but swamps and cliffs cut us off from a direct run."

"Any other places nearby?"

"Oh, no. Delaney and I cut through and cleared for our corrals and shack."

HATFIELD had learned enough. Brent had told him plenty. The Ranger was certain that the flash signals he had seen had come from Brent's former property. Ole Olsen, who had bought the little spread, was definitely a suspicious character. He had come along at too opportune a moment and bought the ranch for a song—and the signals cinched it.

"I'll have to check this Olsen right off," mused Hatfield. "I can see how Brent's old place would come in handy. They could have friends at the river ford to signal when it was clear, and could keep stolen hosses hid at Olsen's."

Philomena had taken up a big broom and begun sweeping. Hatfield got up, reaching for his tobacco sack and papers, meaning to roll a quirly and smoke outside. Playfully, the girl pretended to be sweeping out Dan Brent, pushing at him with the broom. Brent and Hatfield issued forth into the sunshine, and sought a shady spot behind the stable where they might rest and smoke.

"Tell yuh what, Brent," said Hatfield, making up his course as he blew forth clouds of bluish tobacco smoke, "if yuh'll keep it to yoreself, I'll let you in on a secret. Fact is, I'm down here huntin' a feller and mebbe Ole Olsen answers the bill. I heard tell he'd come thisaway."

Brent frowned.

"Feud?" he asked. Texans did not care to act as informers against neighbors, and for the first time Dan Brent's manner cooled.

"No, nothin' like that." Hatfield could read Brent and knew what the man's reaction was, and he thought he knew how to counteract it. "Truth to tell, Brent, I'm a deputy sheriff. If Olsen's the man I want, he's a hoss thief as well as a killer."

Brent blinked. Still he did not care to talk. He had just met the tall man, and he was no fool to be taken in so quickly.

"Have yuh thought of it thisaway, Brent?" Hatfield continued. "S'pose a gang of thieves wanted yore place? It'd make a mighty fine depot to hold stolen mustangs till pards at Whichway could signal the ford as clear. What if this bunch killed Delaney and run off yore hosses, then this Olsen comes along and offers to buy, cheap-like?"

Brent leaped to his feet, color suffusing his bronzed cheeks. The good humor had left his face and his eyes blazed.

"Do yuh savvy what yuh're talkin' about, mister?" he choked. His hands clenched.

"Take it easy, Brent. Yuh can't go off half-cocked in this manhuntin' game. All I'm doin' is show yuh that it's to yore interest to help me. What's Ole Olsen look like?"

"Well, he's scrawny, with a big turkey neck, tow hair and red eyebrows. Sort of lobster-skinned."

"Yuh've told me enough. He's my man. A professional hoss thief." Hatfield was making this up, but he wished to be sure of Brent, for he needed to use the bronc-buster.

"Why, I got a mind to go right over there and let him have it between the eyes!" fumed Brent.

"No. We'll catch him red-handed, and mebbe the whole gang that killed Delaney and stole yore mustangs. I want yuh to take me over there, so I can look at Olsen and see what's up. He's never seen me so he

won't recognize me, and yuh can say yuh've dropped in to pick up somethin' yuh left behind."

"That's the truth," Brent said quickly. "I got a couple of saddles and a pack of duds I been meanin' to pick up."

"We got time to make it there and back before dark," suggested Hatfield. "But yuh'll have to hide yore suspicions, Brent, so Olsen don't get leery."

"I'll do it! Wait'll I saddle Banner."

In short order the two young men were headed for Brent's erstwhile home.

CHAPTER VI

Depot

WHEN the Ranger and Dan Brent pulled up their horses on a grassy hilltop it was mid-afternoon. Brent pointed at the shack and corrals below.

"That's it, Jim," he said.

By now their friendship had grown apace, and it was "Dan" and "Jim."

Hatfield had wished to get the lay of the range, and Brent had brought him through the A C pastures and rolling areas, coming up on his former spread from the north instead of by the lane. The Ranger had carefully coached Brent en route, telling him that he must not show any hostility or suspicion toward Olsen.

"Only two men in sight," said the Ranger, as he lowered his field-glasses. "I reckon that taller one's Ole Olsen. They're workin' on the big corral. Let's go down."

Close in, Brent sang out a loud halloa, and waved as the startled Olsen, and a stumpy man with a sallow skin and thin hair looked up and saw the riders.

Dan Brent did a good job. Hatfield watched closely but he could detect nothing in Brent's manner that might alarm Olsen.

Olsen and the man with him were enlarging the horse corral. There were only half a dozen mustangs down at the other end of the main pen but the Ranger's practised eye noted the large number of hoofmarks, many of them quite fresh, in the soft ground near the gates. So did Brent, who knew how to track animals—and men.

Olsen stood there, hammer in hand. He wore his gun-belt and holstered pistol, and a shotgun leaned against the fence rail close at hand. The other man was armed, also.

"Howdy, Olsen," said Brent. "I run over to pick up that gear I left. Meet my pard, Jim Hale. He's ridin' for Caruthers. How's things goin' with you?"

"Ay, fine," replied Olsen.

His red-skinned face had turned a shade darker, and his light-blue eyes, with the brows so light that the redness of the skin showed through, rolled in his round head. He moved his protuberant Adam's apple. His scrawny body was clad in old blue overalls and a dirty undershirt, and his hat was of straw. He spoke with a thick accent.

"We mak' the pen beegger," he said, and nodded. "Soon ve breeng in our hosses, ay."

If the thieves were using this as a depot, they were not there at the moment, and no mustangs were being held. However, Hatfield decided that the night before they had emptied the corral and that he had bumped into them as they had started the drive for the market where they sold the stolen animals.

Olsen was friendly enough in his dull way, but his assistant had nothing to offer but a grunt or two and a nod or shake of the head. Hatfield thought both men were on guard, and nervous.

What there was to see was quickly observed, and Brent picked up his gear and secured it, Hatfield carrying one of the saddles for him. They took their leave of Ole Olsen, and rode out by the lane to the main road.

"Well, Jim, what do yuh think?" asked Brent eagerly, when they were out of earshot of Olsen's. "Did yuh take note of them fresh mustang tracks? Ain't twenty-four hours old—and yuh can see they come thisaway, no doubt after dark last night. Is Olsen the man yuh're huntin'?"

"The very one, Dan," said Hatfield. "He's up to his old game, I reckon, workin' with hoss thieves."

"Why didn't yuh arrest him, then? I'd have give yuh a hand."

"For a good reason. I figger Olsen's actin' as a depot chief for a gang, and I'd like to grab not only Olsen but his pards as well."

"Yuh're right," Dan Brent exclaimed. "Caruthers'll be powerful interested in all this, Jim."

They were back at the A C before supper-time, and Caruthers was home, with his riders. Dan Brent led Hatfield to the front

porch, on which sat Caruthers, smoking a briar pipe, his booted feet on the rail.

The Ranger permitted the excited Brent to do the talking. Brent introduced him as "Jim Hale," and then gave a quick account of what they had found out by their visit to Olsen's.

When Caruthers realized the full implications of what Brent had told him, he leaped to his feet, his face reddening.

"By galumpin' kanoodle!" he roared. "I'll get my boys and we'll gun Olsen here and now! Cuss his dalbloodled hide, him and his gang must be the ones who raided the range."

"Mr. Caruthers," warned the Ranger, "if we arrest Olsen now, it'll just warn his pards. There's a lot more to it than Ole and his friend at Brent's old spread. Let's not go off half-cocked."

THE cool, soft voice, so sure, the aspect of the mighty Ranger, impressed Caruthers. The rancher was falling under Hatfield's spell.

"Well, what do yuh advise?" he inquired.

"Let me watch Olsen's. I'll lie up in the bush above the place with my field-glasses. Sooner or later they'll drive in with stolen hoses, if that's the game. You have yore men ready and when the time's ripe, we can hit."

"That sounds perfect." Caruthers nodded.

"Keep it to yoreself, though," warned Hatfield. "We don't want any leaks."

After breakfast next morning, the Ranger rode over to a point from which he could observe Olsen's. His field glasses adjusted, he waited in the warm sun that poured over the countryside. Olsen and his friend spent the day working, enlarging the main corral.

For two days the patient Ranger watched. On the third morning when he got into position, he saw that during the night mustangs had been driven into the corrals. He figured there were about two hundred of them.

He watched keenly, but there were no more men around the depot. He saw only Ole Olsen and his helper. The drovers had left, either were hiding in the woods or else had ridden away.

"I'd like a peek at the brand on them hosses," the Ranger mused. "Have to be shore before we strike."

He had with him a pair of oiled moccasins. He put them on and left his spurred boots, his big Stetson, and all but one Colt, which he stuck in his pants belt, at his hiding place. Then he started a careful stalk so as to get close enough in to read a brand on the horses in the corral.

Olsen and his helper went up to the cabin to eat, and the Ranger was able to crawl through bush patches and woods and draw near. He used his binoculars and was able to read brands on a number of the mustangs standing in the large corral. It was 4 T.

Retiring the way he had come, the stealthy Ranger picked up his gear and retreated to the A C. Dark had fallen when he pulled in, saw to Goldy, and walked toward the house. Oil lamps were lighted, giving the place a homelike look, and tantalizing odors of the evening meal cooking, greeted his hungry nostrils.

Adam Caruthers was in the front room, reading the weekly paper which had been picked up with the mail at Whichway. Hatfield imparted his information.

"Yeah, I savvy the Four T," said the rancher. "Belongs to the Talliferos. There's four brothers and they run a spread fifty mile west and south. You want to see a local map? I got one right here in the desk."

Caruthers spread out a large-scale map of the region. It marked the A C boundaries and those of other ranches, taking in about two hundred miles of the country. Existing roads, trails and streams, were also indicated, and the Ranger found it an interesting study. Checking up with Caruthers, the Ranger realized that the highway to Whichway and the ford across the treacherous river was a focal point.

"That ford commands the route from all this country eastward, Caruthers," Hatfield said. "It makes Brent's old place a mighty valuable property, providin' the thieves want to use that ford for stolen stock. They can watch and collect mustangs at Olsen's, and when the signal says the crossin's clear, they can drive. Yore place is second. You sort of lie athwart the main road."

"Uh-huh." Caruthers nodded. "Hale, yuh're a mighty smart figgerer. By cripety crankety, if yuh ain't! I believe that with yore help we'll be able to smash this gang of bandits."

"They drive after dark, when their aides signal the ford is clear," went on Hatfield. "I believe they'll collect more hosses, though, at Olsen's, and then run 'em all through at once. However, I want to keep a sharp eye peeled. We got to be certain them animals

are stolen ones. Can yuh send a rider to Tallifero's? They may not even have missed 'em yet."

"I'll do that," promised Caruthers. "S'pose we set some men, hide 'em in Tate's buildin's at Whichway? They could catch the thieves as we chased 'em up and we'd have 'em."

"It'd be fine," drawled the Ranger, "only I figger somebody at Whichway is in cahoots with the gang, and signals 'em when the ford's clear. It might be Bill Tate. It might be that Mexican lad who works for him, or any hombre who hangs around the settlement. Any force passin' through Whichway'll put 'em on guard. The road'll be covered, too, when they're comin' through. I reckon the best trick'll be to run our men over through the monte and wait in the woods near Olsen's till time to hit."

"Whatever you say goes with me."

JIM HATFIELD enjoyed the meal the Caruthers women set forth for the hungry men. Caruthers had started a rider westward, to check up with the 4 T about those mustangs in Olsen's corral. Believing he had a good chance to snaffle the horse thieves at their depot, the Ranger was biding his time, waiting for the proper moment to swoop.

As Hatfield was breakfasting the next day, with Caruthers and Brent, riders pulled into the yard.

"Say, there's Marty back already, with the Talliferos!" exclaimed Caruthers, who was looking out the window. "Three of the brothers—and some of their boys, I reckon. Marshal Slade's along, by fiddledy-faddledy."

Hatfield and Brent went out with Caruthers to greet the new arrivals who were worn and dusty from hard riding. The Talliferos were rangy, dark-haired fellows, cowmen and Texans. And they were grim.

"Howdy, Adam," the eldest, Kenny, said to Caruthers. "We're on the trail of some hoss thieves. They killed Jim in a fight and run off a couple hundred mustangs. The marshal here is givin' us a hand. We met yore rider on the road and fetched him back with us. He give me yore note. Yes, those are shore enough mustangs and they're stolen ones!"

Marshal Morton Slade nodded to the A C men and to Hatfield.

"I see yuh got a job, big fellow," said the marshal pleasantly.

"That's right, suh. Mr. Caruthers has took me on."

"We're aimin' to smash them bandits, Kenny," growled Caruthers. "Cuss their dirty, palpulatin' hides! Come in and eat, all of yuh, and then we'll have a pow-wow."

The men had been riding all night, and had to rest themselves and their worn horses.

"We heard that more hosses had been run off from the Double Bar B north of us," said Ken Tallifero. "The country's gone to perdition, Adam. There's more outlaws and hoss thieves than yuh can shake a stick at."

"They got to be smashed!" growled Marshal Slade. "It's a powerful organization we're fightin', boys."

"We'll do the trick," promised Caruthers. "We're one up on 'em now."

CHAPTER VII

Stolen Mustangs

ON FINISHING his meal, Hatfield took Dan Brent along with him to spy out Olsen's. Arriving at the vantage point from which the Ranger watched the place before, they saw that hundreds of mustangs were now in the corral.

"They've fetched in another bunch durin' the night, prob'ly from the Double Bar B," said Hatfield. "I reckon they'll drive 'em tonight. The pen's filled, and Olsen ain't finished enlargin' it so's it can hold many more. Dan, I want you to ride back to the Ace and ask Caruthers to come here, careful-like, through the monte. I'll watch. Tell Caruthers to make shore nobody savvies our plans."

"All right, Jim," said Brent. "We ought to be back here before dark."

Olsen and his short, stout assistant were around, but if more thieves were near, they kept hidden throughout the afternoon. The sun was a huge red ball over the western mountains when Brent crept up to Hatfield.

"All set?" he said in a low voice. "Caruthers is comin' with thirty men. The Talliferos and Marshal Slade are along."

"You and Caruthers didn't tell 'em just what the plan is?" asked Hatfield.

"Nope. All they savvy is we hope to hit the thieves tonight."

"Bueno. I'll go back and speak to Adam." Caruthers and his armed cowboys, with

the Talliferos, their men, and Marshal Slade arrived as Hatfield rode Goldy down the slope on the other side of the wooded hills from Olsen's. They were all heavily armed, and ready for the fray.

"What luck, Hale?" asked Caruthers eagerly. Slade and Kenny Tallifero flanked the big rancher.

"More hosses have come in," Hatfield told the rancher. "Prob'ly the Double Bar B bunch. The corral's filled and I reckon the outlaws'll drive tonight or tomorrer at the latest. If it's tomorrer, we'll just have to lie up and wait."

"Yuh're shore of yore ground, young feller?" demanded Slade.

"Shore as it's hot below, Marshal."

They were about half a mile from Olsen's now. The sun dipped from sight, and night came over the land. On the horizon showed the rising moon, as stars twinkled into view.

Hatfield figured he had four good lieutenants in Caruthers, Brent, Slade and Ken Tallifero.

"Gather round, boys," he said to the three. "That next hill looks down on Olsen's, and Brent's up there watchin'. I want yuh to bring yore men up careful and mighty quiet, and get 'em into position, without warnin' the spread. Brent'll be waitin' for yuh, and I'm goin' to creep in close and be ready to signal yuh when the thieves show up. Savvy?"

"We got it," growled Caruthers, and the others nodded.

Armed cowboys lounged about, leaning on their rifles or shotguns. All wore Colt revolvers. There was a tenseness about the gathering that was plainly evident.

Hatfield left it up to Caruthers and his friends to fetch the force up within striking distance. He rode up the slope and, dismounting, joined Dan Brent.

"Nothin' yet, Jim," whispered Brent.

Hatfield imparted to Brent the orders he had given.

"I'm goin' in close, now," he informed, "so's we won't miss anything, Dan. We'll keep quiet till the thieves show."

He left his spurred boots, his Stetson and cartridge belts with Brent, for he could not risk clinking metal in his stalk. There was a light in Olsen's cabin, and the soft wind brought the smell of frying beef and boiling coffee.

The Ranger, expert at such stalking work, started toward the lighted building.

It was slow; it called for the utmost patience and skill. Near to Olsen's cabin he lay flat in black shadows, a small bush clump giving him concealment. The door stood open and he saw Olsen twice and his aide once, as they passed to and fro.

An hour passed, then another. Not a sound came from the point where Caruthers held his men.

Suddenly the Ranger's eyes widened and he strained his ears. There were many sounds in the night, the restless pawings and stampings and neighs of the corralled mustangs, the piping of frogs and insects, the crackling of cooling wood in the darkness. He could even hear the voices of Olsen and his helper now and then.

But he had caught a definite new noise, from the direction of the horse pen. Around the bend a rider loomed against the moonlit sky. After him came another, then several in a bunch. There were about fifteen altogether, Hatfield figured. They rode up to Olsen's and the leader got down as the Swede came to the door.

"All set, Ole?"

"Ya, everyt'ing's clear," replied Olsen. "Dey signal from the ford soon."

"There he goes now!" exclaimed the dismounted man.

IN THE distance, toward Whichway, Hatfield could see the flashing of lights.

"I answer," said Ole Olsen, picking up a lighted lantern. It had a shutter for signaling.

"Flash that we're comin'," ordered the outlaw leader. "All right, boys, start 'em out of the corral."

The bars were being lowered, and the horses hazed out, to start the run to Whichway and the river ford. Hatfield began to creep back toward Brent, to give the warning that would bring Caruthers and his fighters on the double. He was halfway up the hill when he heard violent cursing. He turned, looking back. Far off, where the white lights had been signaling, a red lantern was being waved in the night.

"That means trouble!" called the bandit chief. "Let's slide, boys!"

"Dat signal mean dere's enemies right here!" Ole Olsen's high-pitched voice wailed. "Vhere are dey?"

Hatfield cursed silently. Somehow the danger signal had been flashed from Whichway, despite all his precautions. The riders

were rapidly leaving Olsen's, and the Swede himself and his aide were hurrying to saddle up horses and escape.

"Bring 'em in, Brent!" howled Hatfield.

There was no sense in keeping quiet now, with the enemy warned. He swung, raising his Colt, and opened fire on the outlaws below.

Escaping outlaws were galloping for the tall timber and the matted chaparral of the hills which lay north and west of the little clearing. None tried to use the trail to the main road, but headed the other way. In the shadows they made difficult targets. The danger signal from Whichway had stirred them and they buzzed off like so many hornets.

The Ranger's carefully laid plans to surround the ranch and net the gang were wrecked.

High-pitched screams and profanity rose and the lamp in the shack went out. Blazing Colts flamed as they aimed at the flashes of Hatfield's pistol.

From behind him, Hatfield heard the shrill rebel yell of the Texans. Caruthers was coming with his fighters.

Disregarding his own skin, Hatfield pushed toward the lane leading to the main corral, along which the remainder of the bandits sought to flee.

He hoped to cut them off, slow them until help came up.

As he paused to reload his pistol, a shotgun whooshed and the spreading buck pelted the earth and bushes. One chunk of lead tore through his black hair, which was held in place by his bandanna. The closeness of it stunned him for an instant. An inch lower and he would have died.

The dark shape on horseback who had let go at him had rushed on. But others were coming, and he sought to bring them down.

"Come on, Caruthers, come on Ace!" he bellowed, his feet spread as he crouched in fighting stance.

For moments it was nip-and-tuck, hot fighting for the single man seeking to check the fleeing horse thieves. A couple of bandits veered at him, to drive the annoying enemy back from their line of retreat. His Colt made a hit and the two mustangs tore on down the lane.

Dirt rose from pounding hoofs. The stolen horses, with the gates of the corral wide open, were streaming out, and running with the mounted thieves. The din of the guns and the hoofs, the cries of the startled fighters in the fray, filled the night air.

It was only a matter of a minute until they had passed the Ranger, and were on their way.

He glanced over his shoulders. Caruthers was coming down the slope toward him, calling him.

"Hale—Jim Hale! Where are yuh?"

"Here, Caruthers. This way! Pronto! They're runnin' for it."

The Ace outfit had come over the rough ground afoot, sure of their prey. Their horses were some distance behind them. The figures of Caruthers' men showed black as they loomed against the sky.

The Ranger was in a sweat to get after the foe, try to salvage something from the mess. The few minutes of grace the outlaws had had, thanks to the danger light from Whichway ford, had made all the difference to them.

ADAM CARUTHERS rushed to Hatfield. The rancher was puffing for breath and in one big hand he gripped a double-barreled shotgun.

"Where are the faluticatin' sons of smocks!" he roared.

"On their way," snapped the grim Ranger. "Hustle! Have yore men get after 'em."

Hatfield led the chase, running full-tilt along the lane toward the corral. He fired his Colt several times in the direction the thieves had taken, hoping they would reply and show their position, but they did not.

As he came to the gates of the corral, more masses of horses were pushing out, wildly excited, following blindly as their leaders ran away. It was dangerous, with the big animals crowding him, but he needed a mount, for Goldy was about half a mile back in the woods.

"Caruthers!" he called, as the chief of the A C ran up. "Must be some ropes in Olsen's shack. Grab 'em and try to snaffle mounts, pronto. It's our only chance to catch 'em now!"

He leaped back, pushing Caruthers out of danger as a big black stallion, shouldered off by the crush of horses, bit and kicked at him. But it gave the Ranger his opportunity. He seized the animal's long mane with his left hand and vaulted up, bareback, for in that one instant when the black stallion had attempted to kill the men in his path his driving speed had been slowed.

CHAPTER VIII

The Chase

NOW the stallion went mad. He left the ground, whirled, and crowhopped, trying to throw off the rider. Hatfield had only his hands with which to try to guide the beast, but the black was aware of the steel grip of the Ranger's knees. Keeping down low, Hatfield drummed with his heels as the stallion headed around in the right direction. Abruptly the animal quit bucking and flashed on with the herd.

It was a wild ride. The black ran with a jolting, uneven gait. Now and then he turned and tried to bite the Ranger's thigh but a slap on the nose would send him spurting on again. He joined a group of snorting, galloping mustangs and for a time it was all the Ranger could do to keep from having his legs crushed in the mêlée.

There was a trail of sorts. It turned from the line of the bluffs over the river, with its swamps and treacherous ground below, and the uphill run for a couple of miles finally began to tell on the black stallion. His wind came with whistling, heaving gasps. Blocked off by the bunches of mustangs ahead, Hatfield had not yet seen any of the thieves since he had started his mad ride.

The blackness of the pine woods on the hills was broken here and there by patches of moonlight. He could only guess as to how far behind him Caruthers and the others were, but he was determined to trail the outlaws.

Small groups of the mustangs were splitting off from the main bunch, disappearing among the trees. The country suddenly opened out into rolling rangeland, no doubt part of the A C range. The black stallion, on the downhill grade, picked up speed, but though he was lathered and winded, he was unwilling to quit. Hatfield, between trying to control the horse and at the same time look around for signs of the enemy, had his hands full.

The earth suddenly gave way beneath one of the black's hoofs. There was a sharp crack, and the Ranger was flung violently off the falling mustang. He let himself go, for there was the danger of being caught under the heavy body of the animal.

The wind was jolted from him, as he landed on his side and rolled, trying to cushion the shock.

For a while, he lay still, regaining his wind, feeling the ache of his shaken bones.

The black had a broken leg, and Hatfield had to put him out of his misery, with a mercy bullet in the brain. Then he started to walk back toward Olsen's, limping from a bruise on his left thigh.

It was an hour's walk from the spot where he had left the black before the Ranger saw a rider against the moonlit sky. He made ready—it might be one of the enemy. But when the man drew closer, Hatfield recognized Brent's familiar form, and sang out to him.

Dan Brent turned toward him.

"Jim Hale! I been hopin' to come up with you. Any luck?"

"Nope, none at all. They split up and they've headed for the tall timber, Brent." His eyes were somber as he looked up at Brent. "Where are the rest? Did they get mounts?"

"Caruthers told us to try and rope mustangs but there wasn't more'n two or three ropes that we could find 'em at Olsen's. By the time we got to the corral, most of the mustangs were out. Adam sent a couple of the boys back for our hosses, and then we spread out and come in this gen'ral direction. That was tough luck, losin' 'em just when we was so near."

"Somebody signaled a red danger warnin' from Whichway," growled Hatfield. "There was a leak, somehow."

Brent took him up on his horse and turned, slowly riding back toward Olsen's. It was late when they reached the buildings. All was quiet around the place, with no one around save one A C puncher who had been left there as a guard. A lantern burned in the yard, and in its rays lay two dead men. One was Ole Olsen, with a slug in his heart. The other, a stranger to Hatfield, was a bearded, tough gunman who no doubt had been one of the horse thieves.

"You must have downed both of 'em, Jim," said Brent. "We didn't get close enough to draw a bead."

Hatfield had a drink of water and washed off some of the muck at the spring. Then he went over the hill to call Goldy and pick up his gear. On the powerful sorrel, he set out again, and rode on the trail of the thieves, with Brent at his side.

The first break of dawn found them far out on grassy range, with rock upthrusts and small patches of chaparral breaking the monotony.

"This is our northeast pasture," observed Dan Brent.

In the new light they saw plenty of horse tracks, some of them fresh. They crisscrossed and ran in every direction.

"Them bandits ride mustangs without shoes for the most part," growled Brent.

FAR off to their left they soon sighted a couple of horsemen. Turning, they galloped toward them, but the riders turned out to be two Ace punchers. There were other riders now in view, and Hatfield and Brent joined the Tallifero brothers who were riding together. The horses of all were spattered with clay and lathered, worn from the wild night pursuit.

There was no way to tell which direction the scattered bandits had chosen. They might have doubled back in the darkness, and the escaping mustangs had finished ruining the trail.

"Yuh can send men out to pick up some of yore lost mustangs, Tallifero," growled the Ranger. "Might as well run in any Double Bar B hosses yuh see as well."

But the jig was up, so far as overtaking the thieves went. The weary riders turned back toward Olsen's.

The sun was high when they arrived at the shack. Adam Caruthers had come in, and about twenty of his men had returned. The Talliferos' waddies were present, and soon all the posse struggled back, one by one.

The first to arrive had a fire going and had started to cook some of the deceased Olsen's provisions—strips of beef, coffee, and a large pot of beans they had found on the stove.

Marshal Morton Slade shook his head. His clothing was spattered with clay and bits of dried mud from hard riding. He was openly critical.

"Caruthers," he said, "yuh shore botched this here job. It did come near to workin', I'll admit. But after all, I'm a trained lawman, a Federal marshal, and I feel yuh should have at least consulted me and asked my advice. That's why I come down to these parts, to try and help you folks out. The state officials certainly ain't doin' anything for yuh. I told yuh I'm a Southern man. I was born right here in Texas, and I'm with yuh all the way."

Hatfield was silent. The proof of the pudding, he mused, was in the eating, and they were empty so far as catching the horse thieves went. Slade kept rubbing salt into the wound, and Caruthers gulped. He glanced once or twice at the tall man, but he did not blame it all on Hatfield.

"Yeah, next time let me in on the secret before yuh mosey into such a mess," continued Slade. "First I knew of where we were bound and why, was when we pulled up behind the slope, just before the attack. Now I'd have done it different. I'd have had both out-trails covered with armed men, and I'd have been closer, ready to strike the instant the thieves come in."

"It was all my fault," drawled Hatfield. "Caruthers took my advice, Slade. In order to put men on the roads, it would have meant takin' the chance of alarmin' the cusses before they'd all pulled in. It's mighty hard to work a large number of men into an ambush in the darkness, without a slip. Another thing, we wasn't shore the hoss thieves would come tonight. The ambushers would mebbe have had to lie up for over twenty-four hours without food or darin' to move."

Slade shrugged as his sharp black eyes weighed the tall Ranger. He pulled at the forelock of black hair drooping at one side of his head, and his prominent ears moved.

"Son," he said, "yuh made a bad mistake. Some of us might have been killed. Yuh meant well, but it shore fizzled. Next time, talk to me, before yuh try to plan a trap like this."

"It's easy to say, 'I told you so,' afterwards," snapped Caruthers, coming to Hatfield's defense. "Hindsight's better'n foresight, Slade."

Speaking later with Caruthers, Hatfield sought to discover how their plan might have leaked out. But Caruthers stoutly denied having informed anyone exactly where they were going when they had left the A C.

"Told 'em to be ready for a scrap, that's all," declared the rancher. "I trust my own men like I do myself, and anyways, none left after we started for here. It's a mystery, that's all, how the warnin' got to Whichway."

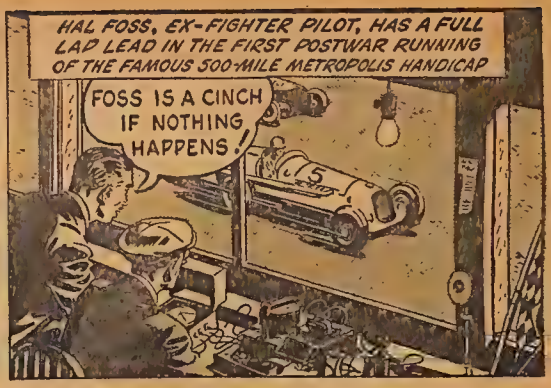
"I don't reckon they'll come near Olsen's agin, not after this close shave," observed the Ranger. "And they'll savvy that Whichway's dangerous, too. I'll have to start over."

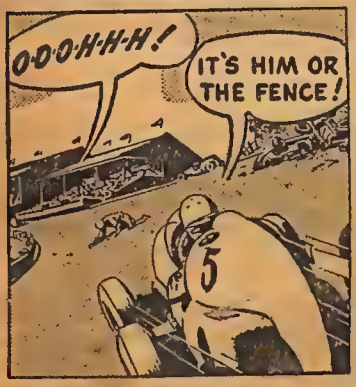
"Yuh got yore man, Ole Olsen, anyways."

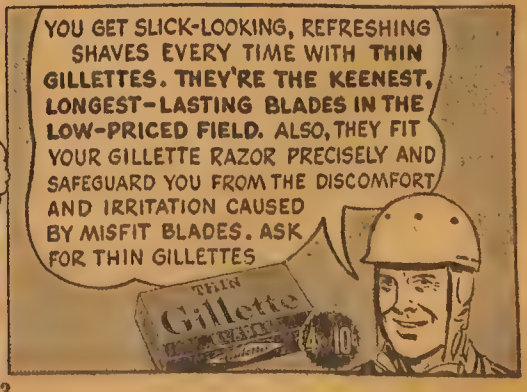
Hatfield had not yet informed Caruthers or

[*Turn to page 34*]

Hal Sacrificed His Chance To Win, But Then...


HAL FOSS, EX-FIGHTER PILOT, HAS A FULL LAP LEAD IN THE FIRST POSTWAR RUNNING OF THE FAMOUS 500-MILE METROPOLIS HANDICAP
FOSS IS A CINCH IF NOTHING HAPPENS!




YOU GET SLICK-LOOKING, REFRESHING SHAVES EVERY TIME WITH THIN GILLETTES. THEY'RE THE KEENEST, LONGEST-LASTING BLADES IN THE LOW-PRICED FIELD. ALSO, THEY FIT YOUR GILLETTE RAZOR PRECISELY AND SAFEGUARD YOU FROM THE DISCOMFORT AND IRRITATION CAUSED BY MISFIT BLADES. ASK FOR THIN GILLETTES
Thin Gillette
4 10

anyone else that he was a Texas Ranger.

"I'll keep it to myself a while longer," he thought, with grim humor. "It'd give that Federal marshal altogether too much to crow over if he savvies I'm a Ranger."

McDowell had mentioned that angle, and Hatfield had hoped to beat the Federal officers to the arrest of the thieves who beset southeast Texas.

THEY buried Ole Olsen and the other outlaw. The A C cowboys were tired from the long vigil and ride and Caruthers wanted to get home. Marshal Slade remained at Olsen's with the Tallifero brothers, who intended to rest at the shack and then try to round up their lost mustangs.

The rest of them rode along the lane to the main road, the easier route back to the A C.

But, tired as he was, the Ranger wanted to visit Whichway, and quickly. He was certain that someone in that settlement must be in league with the outlaws. Someone kept watch on the ford, and signaled when it was safe for the horse thieves to cross with their stolen stock.

"I'll be back to the ranch tonight, Mr. Caruthers," said Hatfield. "I want to have a look-see at the town."

"Yuh need us with yuh?" asked Caruthers, though he and his men were worn out.

"No. Yore hosses are plumb tuckered, and so are you. I'll see yuh later."

It was not far to Whichway, from where the lane hit the highway. As Hatfield rode the sun was warm, and he yawned sleepily as he started down the long grade.

"Won't hurt either of us to take an hour's siesta, Goldy," he mumbled. "We'll just pull off the road into the bush."

The short nap did wonders for him, and in just an hour he saddled up the sorrel and headed for Whichway.

When he reached Tate's Saloon, the midday heat was in full swing. The Ranger saw to it that Goldy stood in the shade of the building, then went into the bar. Bill Tate, the bearded proprietor, was lounging on a box behind the counter. There were several customers drinking—cowboys and a couple of men who lived in the settlement.

"Why, howdy, big feller!" sang out Tate. "I hear tell yuh took my advice and got yoreself a job at the Ace. Nice hombre, Caruthers, ain't he?"

Tate was hearty with him. He pushed a bottle and glass across the bar and shook his head at the Ranger's money.

"On me," he said. "I always like to help out a young jibboo when I can."

Tate's red-rimmed, rather small eyes met his. The saloonman blinked. One of his bearded cheeks was bulged out by his tobacco cud and he turned to the cuspidor, loosening his gaze from the calm gray-green orbs of the tall Ranger.

"Hear there was a fight last night up at Olsen's," Tate went on.

News traveled fast in the range country. No doubt some rider on the road had met the A C outfit, and had been told of the night mêlée with the horse thieves.

"That's right." The Ranger nodded, sipping his drink. "Olsen was a hoss thief. It seems they were usin' his place for a depot, Tate."

He watched Tate closely, and thought that the barman was fearful of him. Tate was too effusive, too eager to please.

"Now ain't that funny!" Tate exclaimed. "Olsen was in here couple times, buyin' nails and such, and he seemed like a quiet, right decent hombre! Never can tell, can yuh?"

"No," replied the Ranger solemnly. "Yuh never can, till yuh find out, Tate."

Finishing his drink, Hatfield bought another.

"I'd like to rub down my hoss, Tate," he said. "I'll be back for dinner pronto."

"All right." The saloonman nodded. "Yuh'll find plenty combs and brushes in the shed—and the wrangler'll help yuh."

CHAPTER IX

Clues

JIM HATFIELD led Goldy around to the rear of the saloon. There he saw a large barn, used as a storage place by Tate, a carriage shed, and a couple of smaller structures. The Mexican lad came up to give him a hand, but the tall Ranger waved him away.

"I can handle it, son," he said.

He took his time, working over the sorrel, and after a while the Mexican woman called in Spanish to the youth, who went inside to eat his dinner. Hatfield had his eye on the tool shed. The door was closed but the padlock was hanging open from the staple. He

ducked quickly around the barn and opened the shed door.

There was no window but enough light came from the doorway to see the tools, shovels, picks, a bale of wire, saws, axes, the usual collection about such a place. But it was the lanterns hanging from nails driven into the wooden walls in which Hatfield was interested.

There was one with a red glass. He took it down and slid up the chimney. Some soot was on the inside, and he tried it with his finger; it was soft, came off easily, a sign that the lantern had been burning not too long before. The wick, as well, was not hard-caked as was the case when a lantern had stood for some time.

There were two lanterns with shutters. The first had not been in use for some days. But the other had been recently alight, and he recalled that before the red danger signal had been flashed, there had been white flashes which Olsen and the thieves had started to answer.

"Lookin' for somethin'?"

Hatfield whirled, his hand flying to his pistol. Bill Tate had come up to the shed. Tate wore a six-shooter at his fat waist but his dirty hands trembled and plainly he was no gunfighter, no match for the lithe young Ranger.

"Don't—don't shoot!" gasped Tate. "I just come to see could I help yuh find what yuh want." He was livid with the fear that was in his bleary eyes.

Hatfield had no definite proof it was Tate who was working with the outlaws. The Mexican lad and others in Whichway might have access to the tool shed and be using the lanterns without Tate's knowledge. But he was curious as to what had occurred the night before. First, the confederate had signaled all-clear at the ford, then suddenly the danger signal had come on. There must have been a last-minute warning, causing the switch, and he could imagine the frantic scrambling around to get the red lamp lighted and in action.

"Lookin' for a couple hoss-shoe nails," growled the Ranger. "One of my sorrel's shoes come loose. Sorry I scared yuh but I get nervous when anybody comes up behind me sudden."

"That's all right. Nails are there in that square box. Help yoreself."

The Ranger's very pantherlike speed, the darkening of his eyes and their fighting coldness, had appalled Tate.

Hatfield considered seizing the saloonkeeper and trying to frighten him into confession. But he hesitated, for he was not yet certain of his ground. Tate could be innocent, and it was not the Ranger's way to strike before he was convinced. He might learn more by watching Tate than by warning him with an accusation he could not prove.

Having learned all he wanted at the shed, he took the nails, a flat-headed hammer Tate lent him, and returned to Goldy, feigning to fix one of his horse's shoes. Then he ate dinner, served by the Mexican cook, and after a drink at the bar, with a subdued, nervous Tate watching him covertly, he took his leave, heading back toward the A C.

But he did not go far—only up the hill far enough to be out of sight when he turned into the chaparral. He unsaddled Goldy, and settled himself for a sleep.

After dark he awoke, saddled the sorrel, and rode back toward Whichway. Tate's lights and others were burning. He dropped his reins a short distance from the saloon, and went quietly forward on foot.

It was about ten P.M. He could see through the open door of the saloon, see men at the bar. To get in closer, the Ranger moved around toward the rear. He observed for a time, then saw Tate come out of the back door of the living quarters, carrying a lantern and a large pan.

Tate went over to the big barn, and entered. Hatfield could estimate the man's progress by the slivers of light through the cracks in the board walls of the building.

The natural conclusion was that Tate was taking a warm bran mash to a calf or a colt in the barn, but when the faint moving light reached the upper loft, Hatfield slid closer. Voices, and general noises from the saloon and other parts of the settlement interfered with hearing, and as Tate had left the barn door ajar, the Ranger stepped in.

IN THE lower section of the barn were stalls, with horses in them. The only light came from the shaft of the steep, ladderlike stairs at the opposite wall. Tate had gone up there, and boards above creaked with his weight as he moved. A hum of talk from above decided it for the Ranger, who tiptoed swiftly along the passage behind the stalls and reached the steps, which had been made by nailing short pieces of boards

between two longer, slanted planks.

The stairs creaked. He took them slowly, and at last reached a point from which he was able to peek over and see Tate. The lantern was standing on the floor, close to three other men, one of whom was swathed in a brown blanket, lying unmoving on the boards.

"Dinny, I don't like yore comin' here!" Tate was protesting. "It's too dangerous. There's an hombre snoopin' around here—he was here just this afternoon. That big feller the chief says is a deputy sheriff. He's the one who come so near trappin' you boys at Olsen's."

"I'd like to meet that cuss man to man," growled Dinny. "But we can't help bein' here, Tate."

He was squatting by the prostrate man, and the two who were unhurt were eating from the pan of food which Tate had fetched in, using their fingers and wolfing it down.

"Lew's bad hit," said Dinny. "He's got have rest and mebbe we'll have to fetch in a sawbones if he ain't to die. We had a close call, and had to hide in the woods with him all day, with them fool cowmen huntin' us. We seen the chief and he said fetch Lew here."

"It was that cussed deputy who winged Lew in the scrap," declared the second outlaw.

Lew, the wounded thief, lay with closed eyes, unmoving. He was either sleeping or too weak to groan. Nearby stood a couple of whisky flasks.

"That deputy shore is a busybody," said Tate, nodding. "He was smellin' around my shed. He's tough, too, and on the prod."

"We'll get him soon," promised Dinny. "'Twas only thanks to the chief's quickness we wasn't all downed at Olsen's. He got here in the nick, Tate, so's you could red-signal us."

"Where're the other fellers?" asked Tate.

"On their way to the coast hideout. We got to lay off Whichway till the place is cleared. Caruthers and that deputy been too clever for their own good. We aim to take the A C, and then we'll really control the route to the Gulf."

They were tough-looking gunnies, Dinny and his friends; rangy fellows with fierce eyes, and heavily armed. They kept their weapons near them.

Now Hatfield knew that Bill Tate was in league with the thieves. It was he who did the signaling from the ford, watching for interference when the outlaws wished to drive through with stolen animals. It was the Ranger who had spoiled the game, when he had noted the flashing lights and guessed what they might mean.

"Chief told me he wasn't shore where Caruthers and Brent were headin'," continued Dinny, starting to roll a quirly after his supper. "It wasn't till the posse got near Olsen's that he found out the plans. He had to think fast then, savvy he couldn't get in and warn us direct for they'd have spied him and it would have spoilt his game. But he was able to sneak away in the dark and he rode here fast— Who's that?"

Dinny and the other outlaw snatched up their carbines and whirled toward the stair well. But Hatfield had ducked down, and crouched on the steep ladder.

"Senor Tate!" called a thin young voice. "You are zere?"

Hatfield had hoped to spy further on Tate, and perhaps snaffle the "chief" they all mentioned with such reverence, but hastily glancing toward the barn door he saw the Mexican wrangler coming in.

"Senor Tate! Weel you come—"

The lad spied the big Ranger on the steps and his eyes grew horrified and round.

"It's my wrangler José, that's all," Tate said. "Nothin' to worry over, boys."

Dinny and his friend relaxed, but a moment later José uttered a screech of warning and fell back from the barn door.

The Ranger did not intend to lose Tate and Dinny. He bobbed up, Colt in hand, covering the three in the loft. He did not count the wounded bandit, who was too far gone to work a gun.

"Reach, boys!" he said sharply, his voice cutting them with the insistence of a razor-sharp blade.

DINNY was half-covered by the stout Tate, whose rabbit eyes showed his cowardice. But for an instant, Dinny and the other outlaw froze, aware of the deadly pistol and the big, cold-voiced man behind the persuader.

"Deputy Hale!" cried Tate. "How'd you get here?"

"Yuh fat old fool," snarled Dinny. "Yuh led that cussed busybody to us."

"Tate," ordered Hatfield, "I want yuh to pull their fangs. Step behind Dinny first and take his Colts."

"No, yuh don't!" howled Dinny.

He sought to use the trembling Tate as a shield, as he made a swift draw. For a moment blinding confusion held sway in the loft. Dinny got off a shot, the bullet whirling within an inch of Hatfield's head, but the Ranger made a skillful hit, his slug slicing into Dinny's ribs, where the outlaw's side was exposed.

The heavy explosions roared in the loft as Tate set up a shrill howl.

"Don't shoot me, Hale!"

Stricken by the falling Dinny's fate at the supposed deputy's hands, the other bandit, hands elevated, stared with open mouth at the big Ranger as Hatfield jumped up into the loft and started at them.

Dinny folded up on the loose boards of the flooring. His six-shooter clanked dismally from his relaxing fingers.

Hatfield moved over, and Tate cowered, shrinking from him.

"Pull his guns like I told yuh to, Tate," ordered the Ranger again. "Then both of yuh stand against the wall, yore hands up, and keep yore back to me."

Tate quickly obeyed. Disarmed, the other outlaw followed him to the far wall. There was a mow door there, which gave into the side yard by the barn. It was fastened inside by a chunk of carved wood with a nail in the center on which the stop could be turned.

Hatfield took over the enemy guns, narrowly watching the bandit beside Tate. The gunny might have a hidden weapon inside his shirt. He checked the unconscious outlaw, who had not moved during the swift fight.

The ladder stairs creaked loudly, and the Ranger, back to the wall, and his Colt up, with the hammer spur back under his thumb, waited for whoever was coming up.

It was Marshal Morton Slade, and his U. S. marshal's badge was pinned to his dark shirt. The eagle on top glinted in the light of the lantern, and the rangy Slade had a cocked Colt in his bony hand.

CHAPTER X

Accusation

SLADE paused on the stairs, staring into the loft. He took in Hatfield, the ready revolver in the tall officer's hand, Tate and the other outlaw with hands up, the bodies of Dinny and the wounded one on the floor.

"Good evenin', Slade," drawled the Ranger. "I got everything under control."

"So I see," Slade remarked dryly, and came slowly up to the loft. "I heard the shots and yells, Hale, and hustled to see what was goin' on. I know Tate. Who're the others?"

"Prisoners, Slade, three members of the hoss thief gang. Tate's in cahoots with 'em. He's the one who's been signalin' 'em from the ford."

Slade nodded. He showed not the least surprise.

"I know that, Hale. I suspected Tate all along, and I've had my eye on him. Since yuh've let the cat out of the bag, I'll have to arrest him now. Yuh've done a good job, but I say what I did before—yuh ought to pay more attention to details and not jump so all-fired fast. We might have snaffled a bunch more, if we'd let Tate have his rope. However, yuh're young and yuh'll learn, but we ought to work together. I'll take over these prisoners, and save you the trouble."

"Thanks, Marshal," drawled the Ranger, "but I can see to 'em."

Slade frowned.

"I don't want yuh to get sore, Hale, but I got to point out to yuh that I'm a Federal officer. I supersede local officials. There are Federal charges agin these hombres, savvy? They come first. Yuh may have had a warrant for Ole Olsen from yore county but down here yuh ain't empowered to make other arrests. Seems to me yuh're flailin' out mighty high, wide and handsome."

The eagle on Slade's badge was screaming. For a decade following the Civil War, Texas had been occupied by hostile authorities and only now were the Rangers, the mighty State officers, and the Texans themselves, really coming into full control. McDowell and the higher-ups wanted no conflict with the Federal men.

Hatfield had not yet declared himself as a Ranger, and Marshal Slade was right in his contention that a deputy sheriff from some other county had no right to operate in such a fashion as Hatfield was.

"Why, cuss it," went on Slade drily, "if yuh keep it up, Hale, there won't be no outlaws left for us to catch! No, yuh'll have to turn these prisoners over to me."

"Would yuh let me see yore warrant, Slade?" asked the Ranger politely. "I just

want to be shore. Mebbe we can question 'em together."

"Shore, shore—I'll let yuh hear what they got to say," promised Slade. "Here's my commission."

He reached in a shirt pocket, and drew out a folded paper. He snapped it open with a flip of his wrist and waved it at Hatfield, who reached out with his left hand and took it.

The Ranger squatted by the lantern, his back to the blank wall. As he glanced at the commission he could watch Tate and the other thief from the corner of his eye as they stood near the mow door. Retaining his grip on his ready Colt, while Slade frowned self-importantly, the supposed deputy sheriff from nowhere read the sweeping authorization.

". . . . empowered to make arrests within the continental limits of the United States. . ."

The name of the holder, "Morton Slade," had, as usual, been written in the proper space. It was somewhat smudged, and there were thumbprints and stains on the face of the commission, but that was not unusual, carried as it was in a pocket.

Hatfield's left thumb, moving on the smooth paper, felt a roughness close to the name of the marshal. It was not dirt. He tested further with his thumb ball, sensitive to slight impressions.

Suddenly, suspicion roused, he held the paper up to the lantern, and the light shone through. Now he could see the spaces which had been erased, where the name had been written in—and the former name, not visible at a casual glance, could be made out, enough of the letters so Hatfield could finish it for himself. There was a capital "L," a "w," and another capital, "H," an "n,"—and written over the erasure, the bold name of Slade!

"Put down yore gun, Slade!" snapped Hatfield, whipping around to cover the rangy man.

"Have yuh gone loco!" shouted Slade.

THE steady pistol cowed him, and he knew he would have died then had he resisted. He set his teeth but dropped the revolver, raising his large, bony-knuckled hands.

"This commission belongs to Lewis Hogan, Slade!" said Hatfield. "He dropped out of sight down here, while trailin' hoss thieves. I reckon you and yore amigos killed him. Yuh changed the name and it's a nice bit of brand-blottin' but I could see it when I held it up to the direct light! I'd say yuh're in cahoots with Tate and the outlaws. And savvyin' it, you're the one who sneaked off in the night, rode here and warned Tate to give the danger signal!"

Slade had fooled him, for he had believed the supposed marshal had come to the vicinity to hunt the missing Hogan.

Fury flashed from Slade's quick, dark eyes. His bony face twitched, and he began to curse Hatfield at the top of his voice.

"Quiet!" shouted the Ranger.

Slade's angry oaths, berating the Ranger, filled the air. From the corner of his eye Hatfield caught the sudden movement of the outlaw beside Tate. He had rubbed that wooden turn-stop open with his shoulder, and now he kicked open the mow door and turned to jump out, reaching for a hideout gun Tate had not taken.

Hatfield hastily sent a shot to stop his escape, and as the Ranger was forced to deal with the escaping bandit, Slade whirled and jumped into the stairwell. Hatfield's following shot missed, for the man was below the level of the loft floor when he fired.

An instant later bullets whipped at the Ranger. Slade fired from below, up through the flooring, knowing about where Hatfield was standing. Slade also had had a hidden gun, of course, under his dark shirt.

The heavy slugs easily ripped through the soft pine, stabbing close to Hatfield, who was unable to see his enemy. Slade emptied his gun, hoping to hit Hatfield. He kicked over the lantern and it went out. Turning to jump aside, as he shifted he felt a tearing sensation in his left shoulder which paralyzed him.

He knew he was hit. One of Slade's upward-ploughing bullets had found his body. The impact sent him staggering against the splintery wooden wall and he nearly fell but managed to support himself with his right hand.

Bill Tate was shrieking, cowering in a dither of fear on the floor, near the open mow door.

"Chief, don't shoot me—Slade, look out! Yuh got the sidewinder—watch out for me, chief!"

So, thought the Ranger, in his agony, Slade is their leader!

It was ironical, learning that important

information at this moment. Jim Hatfield wondered how much good it would be to him. He sought to pull himself together, bit at his lip, trying to fight off the shock of his wound. Slade must be reloading.

Next he was aware that Slade was bawling:

"Come on, boys, hustle! That cussed deputy's in the loft. He shot Dinny and we got to take him!"

Slade had reinforcements, no doubt more of the outlaw bunch. They were coming into the barn. Hatfield felt the warm blood flowing down his back, the strength coursing from his veins.

"I—I'll go out if I ain't careful," he thought desperately, confused by the agony.

It took all his strength to think clearly. The moon and stars showed in the mow door. Below lay the soft earth of the barnyard. The opening gave out on another side from the front door, through which his enemies crowded at Slade's insistent alarm.

The Ranger staggered toward the lighter rectangle of the mow door. Tate was nearby, bleating in his fright.

"Here goes!" thought Hatfield, and launched himself into space.

Gunshots reverberated in the barn. Slade was shooting again through the boards.

HATFIELD landed on something soft. He realized that his first shot at the outlaw who had jumped to escape must have got the man. He fell over on his left side and the jolt, as his torn flesh was rubbed, sent spasms of pain through him.

For a moment he could not move. Then he gritted his teeth and fought his way to his knees.

"Got to call—Goldy!" was all that was in his mind.

He reached his feet, staggered a few steps, whistling for the sorrel.

There were yells and shots from the barn. Lights were being rushed from the saloon, and curious customers were hurrying to see what was going on.

"He jumped out the mow, boys!" Tate was crying. "Don't shoot me! Careful, it's me—Tate—"

A golden shape flashed along the lane and the powerful gelding was beside Hatfield. He reached for the saddle-horn and somehow pulled himself into the leather seat.

"Let's go," he muttered, head sunk on his breast.

Goldy started off. Slade and his aides were in the loft now, and Tate kept shrieking:

"It's me! Don't shoot! He jumped out, I tell yuh!"

"There he goes!" came a bull-voiced shout, and bullets followed the Ranger.

CHAPTER XI

Killers

DAN BRENT, after returning to the A C with Adam Caruthers and the cowboys under his command, slept off the fatigue which the long foray against the horse thieves had left in its wake.

The next morning, the life of the ranch was resumed. There were many important tasks and every day had its allotment of them. Animals had to be cared for or they would get into trouble, and die. That meant loss of profit.

His own sudden change of status from that of a promising young rancher to hired hand was something of a disappointment, but Brent was young and hopeful. Besides, the switch had compensations. Now he was near Philomena most of the time and could press his suit for her hand.

At the breakfast table there was a lot of talk concerning the fight at Olsen's. Some agreed with Marshal Slade that it should have been handled differently, and Brent found himself defending his big friend, Jim Hale.

"Hale was right all the way through!" shouted Brent. He had to shout to make himself heard above the loud voices of the armchair generals, fighting the battle after it was over. "You fellers make such a racket wherever yuh are, yuh'd have give the show away if Hale hadn't worked it like he did."

In such arguments, it was the man with the strongest voice and the most biting sarcasm who won. Too much logic melted its fine points in the heat of debate.

A waddy next Brent pounded the table with his knife butt, making the tin plates and cups dance and rattle.

"Me, I say he should have spread a circle all the way around Olsen's! He could've snaffled 'em thataway."

"Yeah, and he should have called out the U.S. Army," said Brent witheringly. "That's

how many men it would have took to surround that place right, without givin' them hoss thieves warnin'. What good would a thin line we could have made have been? How would you like to have had that gang of outlaws hit right where yuh was standin'?"

"Shucks, I'd 've stopped 'em," declared Brent's opponent.

"Uh-huh. And we'd 've used yuh for a strainer after yuh got through! No, general, yuh got to think in the bandit-catchin' game. Them outlaws ain't tame cows yuh can herd and turn and drive."

Adam Caruthers had come in and he stood listening to the talk. There was no end to the arguments.

"Let's go, fellers," he boomed, in his powerful voice. "Nothin' left to eat but them tin plates. We're two days behind now, smock me in the mock if we ain't. Up and at 'em!"

A tall cowboy, known as a wit among his mates, jumped up. "I'll settle the argyments!" he yelled. "Here's the answer—I'm to be Queen of the May!"

The laugh broke up the party, and they went out to saddle their mustangs and follow their boss out on the range.

Brent smoked a cigarette, as he went down to the big horse corral to pick out a bronco. It was his job to top off the semi-wild creatures, those which had never been ridden, and those which had been cunning enough to elude the roundups in the brushy hills for two or three years. The latter were often worse buckers and cleverer than the raw mustangs.

Sometimes Brent had to blindfold a horse in order to saddle it at all. It was dangerous work, but it had a thrill in it and Brent enjoyed the prestige it gave him. Besides he was fond of horses.

The sun came up, warming the air. Caruthers and his punchers had ridden off, north of the buildings, where they were checking up on A C cattle, making sure all spring calves had been branded, and attending to other tasks.

Brent enjoyed the life of the big ranch. It was peaceful, when the boys were out. Over at the house, he could see Philomena's trim figure now and again as she stepped out to hang up washing or to empty a pan of water on the ground. Butterflies and other insects were flying lazily in the sunlight. A warm breeze rippled the curly grass in the pastures, and the river flowed full. Birds hunted food in the trees along the stream.

There were domestic animals about—a couple of pet hounds belonging to Caruthers, some chickens which were Mrs. Caruthers' pride. Everybody worked hard on a ranch; but the women worked harder than anyone, thought Brent.

Philomena emerged from the back door, carrying a wooden churn. She set it in the shade, and went back inside. Soon she came back with crocks of cream which she poured into the churn. Then she sat down on a soap box and, setting the cover, began to work the dasher. It took time to make the butter they enjoyed so much.

THERE was a Chinese, an old fellow who had somehow meandered through Texas to this point from the West Coast, and he was cook, although Mrs. Caruthers superintended the culinary department and did much of the cooking herself. She and her daughter made jelly and preserves from wild fruit they picked in season. Their preserving added many a tasty item to the Frontier menu, supplementing the diet of beef and starches. They also mended and made clothing.

Freddie, the slim youth who acted as wrangler, was whistling over at the stable as Brent went to work, riding a lanky black gelding who had been acting up. He was about to start on another mustang when he saw some riders approaching along the lane which led in from the main road.

They did not seem familiar to him, and he paused, turning to watch them as they came to the creek ford. Then he recognized Marshal Morton Slade in the lead. The fellows with him wore leather or corduroy riding clothing, Stetsons, black spurred boots, and bandannas—the usual range garb. They were all armed, but most men in Texas carried weapons wherever they went.

Slade pulled up at the creek and looked toward the ranch, as though sizing up the place. He had fifteen riders behind him.

The A C was a peaceful, domestic scene, with Philomena still churning butter at the back of the house. Slade raised his arm and started to splash his horse across the stream. The riders came toward the house, watching intently.

Something about their attitude made Brent uneasy. But he believed Slade to be a Federal official, a friend and ally. He rode over toward the yard, and waved at Slade as the man came up.

"Howdy, Marshal Slade!" sang out Brent. "What holds?"

"Hullo, Brent," Slade said gruffly. "Where's everybody?"

"Well, the boss and the boys are out workin.' I'm toppin' off mustangs. Where yuh bound?"

"We're huntin' for a man. I'd like to speak with Jim Hale."

"Hale ain't here. He left us yesterday while we was on the way home from Olsen's, and said he was ridin' to town. Ain't seen him since."

"Yuh're shore of that?" demanded Slade.

The dark eyes drilled Brent, who felt irritated that his information should be doubted.

"Yuh can ask Caruthers if yuh're a mind to," he said. "After all, why should I lie to yuh?"

Slade frowned. He seemed about to snap back at Brent, but then shrugged.

"Wait here, boys, and keep a sharp eye peeled," he growled, and rode past Brent, galloping to the rear of the house.

He touched his hat, and spoke to Philomena, who smiled and answered him. Slade did not dismount. He touched his black hat again and returned to his men.

"Come on, boys," he ordered. "He ain't been here."

He nodded shortly to Brent, and turning his powerful horse, led the way back across the river and along the out-road.

Brent scratched his head, and strolled over to Philomena. "Filly, if it ain't a secret, what'd the marshal say to you?"

"Don't you wish you knew?" she said teasingly.

"Aw, come on! He asked me where Jim Hale was and wouldn't believe me when I said he hadn't come in yet."

"Evidently he has a better opinion of my veracity than he has of yours. When I said Jim Hale wasn't here, the marshal took my word for it."

She was still teasing him, but somehow Brent did not feel in a jesting mood. Out of clear sky, Philomena added quietly:

"You know, somehow I don't like Marshal Slade's looks. I've tried to decide what it is and I think it's his eyes. They slide away when you look straight at him."

"Huh! Yuh can't be too particular in Texas, Filly, about a man's looks."

"Well, I'm not."

"To tell the truth, them possemen with Slade were all tough-eyed. Had the earmarks of hard fighters. Wonder why Slade's so all-fired anxious to find Hale? It sort of worries me."

"Well, don't get a headache. You're not used to it, you know. As for Jim Hale, he's cut his eyeteeth and if I ever saw anyone who looked able to take care of himself, it's Jim."

"That's right. He's a salty hombre. I'd ride the river with him any time."

BRENT went back to his work, but he kept looking toward the road, hoping to see the golden sorrel and the tall rider in whom he had come to place great confidence. He had not known Hale long but the man had a magnetism which drew Brent.

The day passed, but Jim Hale, as they knew Hatfield, failed to materialize. Caruthers came in with the boys, tired from the long hours of work. They ate, talking things over as usual, resuming the endless arguments about the fight at Olsen's.

When another day was nearly gone, and no word had come from Jim Hale, Brent was really alarmed. He confided his worries to Philomena, who was sitting on the front porch, sewing. Caruthers and the A C men were out on the range, but they would be back, hungry as a pack of coyotes, within an hour or two.

"Oh, he probably decided to ride on," said Philomena. "You may never see him again. Those wandering cowhands stop a few days and if they don't like a spread or the country, they move on."

She wanted to set Dan Brent's mind at ease. She did not like seeing him worried.

"But Jim's a law officer," Brent protested. "He told us he'd be back here by evenin'. He ain't the kind to go off without a word."

"Maybe he saw an outlaw he wanted to trail," suggested Philomena.

"Mebbe. But I got a feelin' he's in trouble. I think I'll ask the old man if I can take tomorrer off and go look for Hale."

He felt better over his decision, and went back to work. The sun was low in the western sky. Brent was at the corral to the north of the house and the A C outfit had ridden off that way in the morning.

He heard a faint halloa and looked across the rolling pastures. A cowboy—it was Johnny Sevenup, so nicknamed because he always wanted to play that game—was coming at full-tilt toward the ranch. Brent

waved, and Johnny began zigzagging his mustang, to show he was the bearer of important news.

He pulled up, his lathered horse snorting, close to Brent.

"The boss has been drygulched, Brent!" he gasped. "I think he's dyin'!"

CHAPTER XII

Dan Brent Takes Over

BRENT couldn't believe his ears.

"What!" he cried, as he leaped forward.

Johnny Sevenup's voice could not possibly have carried to the house, but through some psychic telegraphy Eleanor Caruthers was alarmed. It might have been the swift thudding of the mustang hoofs which had told her something was wrong. Adam's wife ran from the kitchen door, and started toward them.

Johnny Sevenup pushed toward her, with Brent running after him.

"Ma'am," Brent heard Johnny say, "They're fetchin' him in on a blanket stretcher. He's been hit."

"How—did it happen?"

Brent gulped, watching the stricken wife. All the color had drained from her pretty face and her eyes had lost their sparkle. Around her lips deep lines showed, and he jumped forward to seize her arm as she swayed.

"I'm all right," she said, biting at her lip. He could see that her fists were tightly clenched. "How did it happen, Johnny?"

"Don't know, exactly. We was up two miles from the big spring. I'd just run a cow and calf out of a draw when Slim sang out the boss had been shot. He was about a quarter mile from where I was, see? Slim says he wasn't shore where the bullet come from, but it was long range, a heavy rifle. There's some wooded ridges up there and the drygulcher must have hid on one of 'em and watched his chance."

"Here they come," growled Brent.

In the distance, riders were slowly approaching.

"Do you know how badly he's hurt?" asked Mrs. Caruthers.

Johnny shook his head. He would not say to her what he had to Brent, that he thought the boss was dying.

Philomena came from the front of the ranchhouse.

"What is it, Mother?" she called anxiously.

Eleanor Caruthers joined her daughter, and the miserable Brent trailed along, feeling entirely helpless and useless.

"Dad's hurt," said Mrs. Caruthers quietly. "Shot by some beast of a drygulcher. Get his bed ready, and I'll see to the hot water and bandages. They're bringing him in now."

"Anything I can do?" asked Brent.

Mrs. Caruthers shook her head. Philomena was already running back to the house, and Brent could hear her sobbing. Mrs. Caruthers walked toward the kitchen. She was erect, but Brent could see that her hands were still clenched.

The sunshine had vanished from Brent's world. He could feel the misery and alarm of Philomena and her mother. He loved and admired them both, and he had a male's susceptibility to the emotions of the women he looked to.

"Cuss him, whoever done it!" he muttered, his hand itching for his Colt.

It must have been one of the outlaws, he decided, a horse thief getting even because Caruthers had pursued them.

He rode out to meet the funereal procession of Ace cowboys who surrounded the crude stretcher supported between two horses. They had cut two strong poles and made a blanket bed on which to transport the heavy Caruthers.

Dark stains showed how much blood he had lost from the gaping wound in his side. His head was limp, his face drained of color.

"Is—is he dead?" asked Brent hoarsely.

"Not yet," replied Slim grimly.

Caruthers could not speak or move. His eyes were open but they rolled in his head. He was unconscious.

Tenderly the men carried him into the ranchhouse, his home, and laid him out on the clean bed Philomena had ready. Brent saw the tears streaming down the white face of the girl he loved, but she kept her sobs stifled.

Mrs. Caruthers came in, carrying a pan of steaming water. She had a pile of clean white cloths on the commode.

"We'll keep him quiet, boys," she said, taking command.

The men filed out. They felt, as Brent did, that they were clumsy, useless. The ranch

women were the nurses and doctors, far more skilled than the run-of-the-mill cowboy.

Brent went out to the bunkhouse with the rest of the boys, to smoke a quirly and talk it over. The sun had not yet dropped behind the hills, but the world seemed black. Their voices were subdued. They almost whispered.

THERE had been an attempt to find the killer, but the chaparral and rocks were thick, and whoever had shot Caruthers had decamped immediately, had a long start. With night so close, and no sign to go on, they had given up and caught up with the men bringing in the boss.

The Chinese cook served their dinner in the shed. They ate, but there was no loud talk and they had forgotten the arguments.

Brent hung around the kitchen door, and after a time Philomena emerged. He took her hand, holding it tightly, and she began to cry. He put an arm around her, hoping to comfort her.

"How is he, Filly?"

"We don't know if he'll live through the night or not!"

The nearest doctor was thirty miles away. A messenger had been started off at once, when they had brought in Caruthers. Philomena was helping her mother care for her father. She went back into the house.

Brent turned in after a time. Through the open bunkhouse window near his couch he could see the yellow rectangle marking Caruther's room, the lamp burning in the night. In there, Eleanor Caruthers and her daughter watched over the husband and father.

"I'll have to take over, run things for 'em while he's laid up," thought Brent. He would not admit that Caruthers might die.

Brent lay awake, restlessly tossing. But finally he fell asleep.

He came back to sudden consciousness, a nightmare sweat on him, a dread which clutched at his heart and made his body cold. Eyes wide in the faint light of the bunkhouse, he lay rigid. Then he caught a scratching sound at the open window, and a faint, hoarse whisper said:

"Brent—Brent!"

Dan Brent sat up quickly, bumping his head on the bunk above. He went to the open window, and he could still hear the insistent whisper:

"Brent—Brent! It's Jim."

Brent looked out. A dark form lay there, close to the wall under the window. He knew it was his friend, Jim Hale. Climbing out the window, he crouched beside the big fellow.

"What's wrong, Jim!"

"I'm wounded, Brent, need—help. Ain't such a bad injury but I lost a lot of blood." His breath was short. "Food—warm coffee—"

The golden sorrel, the big man's magnificent gelding, stood with drooped head close at hand. Goldy had brought his rider to the A C.

"Take care—of Goldy, will yuh?" asked Hatfield.

"Right away. I'll wake the boys."

"Has—Slade been here?"

"He was here askin' for you couple of days ago. I was worried over yuh, meant to hunt yuh, but the boss was drygulched last evenin' and he's near death."

"Cuss him!" growled Hatfield.

"Who?"

"Slade, of course! He's chief of the outlaws, Brent."

"You mean the U. S. marshal?"

"He's not an officer. Slade killed a real U. S. marshal, took his badge. No doubt him and his men shot Caruthers."

Brent was amazed. For a moment he thought his friend might be delirious.

"I'll fetch some of the boys and we'll see to yuh, Jim," he said.

"There's no strangers here, are there—who might be Slade's friends?"

"Not a one. Yuh're safe with us, Jim."

"Bueno. I'm starvin' for a decent meal. Keeps me weak—need food."

Brent roused the boys, and they assisted the big man inside to a bunk. A lantern was lighted on the table. Brent sent a couple of the cowboys to take care of the sorrel, and Hatfield relaxed. On the kitchen stove was hot coffee. The Chinese cook, awakened from dreams of Cathay, sputtered some but rose and began fixing hot food for the wounded Ranger.

Brent sat on a box beside Hatfield. The tall man's face was peaked. He had lost weight, and when Brent made him turn over and lie so he could see the wound, the bronc buster understood why.

A HEAVY caliber bullet had ploughed up at an angle, entering the flesh above the biceps, then slashing for four inches along Jim Hatfield's back. The shirt and un-

dershirt were in shreds and bits of cloth stuck in the crusted, scab areas.

The lower part of his shirt was plastered to his back. Unable to raise his left arm, Hatfield had been forced to welter in his own blood until he had been able to find a hiding place in the chaparral and lie still. Then Nature had slowed, finally checked the bleeding. Dirt had worked into the wound, too, but Brent thought the infection was local.

With hot water and clean rags, Brent set to work to clean up his friend. It took quite a while to ease off the shirt and loosen shreds of the garment. Hatfield lay without complaint, even when Brent probed the long wound.

"The bullet ain't in there, Jim. Though it looks like yore shoulder blade might be nicked."

"If it is, it ain't too bad. I can wiggle it. Hurts some, but seems more like a bruise."

"Who shot yuh?" asked Brent.

"Slade, of course."

"Yuh got Slade on the brain, ain't yuh?"

"For strong reasons, Brent. Roll me a quirly, will yuh?"

"Shore. And to cap the bargain I'll lend yuh a clean shirt. Yores is a thing of the past."

Brent picked up the ruined shirt he had removed in sections from his tall friend's torso. Something metallic clinked on the rough floor. Brent stooped to see what it was, thinking it might be a silver dollar.

But it was a silver star on a silver cricle, and Brent knew just what it was.

The emblem of the Texas Rangers!

CHAPTER XIII

On Guard

QUICKLY Brent glanced at his friend, as he held out the badge.

"This yores, Jim?" he asked.

"Yeah, it is, Brent," Hatfield said. I'm a Ranger. I come down here to help Caruthers and you and the others the hoss and cattle thieves have been plaguin'. My right handle is Hatfield. Slade fooled me. I had been told to watch for Federal officers, and I took Slade for granted."

Brent whistled, impressed.

"A Ranger! I though yuh was one whale of a deputy! I got a lot of admiration for you boys. Why didn't yuh tell us who yuh are?"

"I like to work quietlike for a time," said Hatfield, "to have a look-see before I strut around with my star on. Often I learn a lot more thataway."

"What yuh want to do with the star?" asked Brent.

"I'll put it here, for the moment."

There was a small ledge in the head of the wooden bunk into which the star fitted nicely. Because of his hurt back, Hatfield lay on his right side or his stomach, and the metal badge would press into him.

Brent finished cleansing the wound, and dressing it. Then he put a warm wool shirt on Hatfield, who smoked with relish.

"I feel better already," said the big fellow. "Yuh s'pose they'll have that chow in? Oh, here it comes."

The Chinese came in, carrying a tray on which stood a pot of coffee, a tin mug, sugar bowl and pitcher of milk, and a platter piled high with beans, fried potatoes, steak, and home-made doughnuts. The Ranger's eyes widened and lying on his uninjured side, he went to work.

No wolf ever did a better job making a meal disappear. Brent had coffee and doughnuts with him. Some of the other cowboys gathered around, and they smoked, listening to the tall man's story after he had finished eating.

"I rode to Whichway," explained the Ranger. "Somebody there had signaled to the thieves at Olsen's. We savvied that. I'd seen it happen twice. I found the lanterns they used, in Tate's tool shed. I pretended to leave, doubled back, and spied—and around ten o'clock that night out come Tate with a pail of chow. He went into the barn, and up to the loft. Up there was an outlaw I'd wounded in the night fight, with two of his pards!

"I listened a while, and found out that Tate was in cahoots with 'em and had been signalin' from the ford when it was safe for the thieves to run the mustangs through. They spoke of a chief, too, somebody who run the show. Then the Mexican who works for Tate spotted me and set up a howl. I went up to the loft and captured Tate and the two bandits with their wounded pard.

"Then Slade come runnin' in. He claimed the prisoners, as a Federal marshal would, figgerin' me as what I'd claimed to be, a

deputy sheriff. I asked to see his papers, and he flourished 'em at me. When I examined his commission close, I could see Slade's name had been written in over another, a brand-blottin' job!"

"His papers were stolen ones, then!" exclaimed Brent. "The badge, too, I reckon!"

"Right. That commission belonged to Marshal Lewis Hogan, a real U. S. marshal who disappeared down thisaway some time ago, along with several cowmen from the interior."

"Well, I'll be hanged!" cried Brent. "I met Hogan. He come through several times, on the hunt for the thieves. I know four of the men who were with him, too. They were from the Slash J, an outfit a hundred mile west of us."

"Slade moved fast," said Hatfield. "He dived into the stairwell and fired through the loft floor. A lucky one slashed me, and Slade had some of his men not far off. I jumped out of the mow and called my hoss. They chased me but I made the chaparral and hid. But the wound bled so much it sapped my power.

"I lay up all day and another night. When I felt able to move and the worst of the bleedin' had stopped, I tried to make my way here, and found Slade's outlaws coverin' the road. They were huntin' me. I had a few close calls, and couldn't ride in the daylight. I worked my way through the brush and at night. It was mighty slow going and I was short of food. Wound kept breakin' open, too, weakenin' me. But finally I got near here. I figgered Slade would be watchin' you, and so I come in after dark, and quietlike."

Hatfield felt he owed it to Dan Brent to give him the whole story. Brent was a fine young fellow, decent, brave and loyal. He had shown he was a friend of Hatfield's, and of the law.

BRENT whistled. A C cowboys, hearing the story of Morton Slade's perfidy, scowled angrily.

"Bet it was Slade and his gang who dry-gulched the boss!" growled "Slim."

"Wait'll we meet the cuss!" threatened Johnny Sevenup, patting his Colt.

"Must have been Slade who wrecked yore plans to catch them outlaws at Olsen's," declared Brent.

"It was. He didn't savvy where we were headin', but when we got near, he could figger easy enough. He couldn't go down and warn his pards, for I'd have spotted him, and he wanted to keep his advantage. But he was able to drop back in the dark, and ride for Whichway, where he told Tate to flash the danger signal. And then he had time to return to our party, since we'd all gone off lickety-split after the outlaws."

"Yuh're plumb wore out," said Brent. "And we all need shut-eye, too. Douse the light, Johnny. . . ."

In the morning, Hatfield looked like a different man. The warm food, the undisturbed sleep had quickly restored him. Brent took a look at the wound while breakfast was cooking. It was healing well save for a small spot which needed further cleansing with hot water.

The Ranger stayed in his bunk, and Brent brought him breakfast, a hearty meal.

"I'll be on the prod again in a day or two, Brent," he promised. "Now listen to this: yuh better set a guard out, night and day, to watch for Slade. The outlaws aim to grab the Ace, so's they'll control the route to the

[*Turn page*]

Now She Shops "Cash and Carry"

Without Painful Backache

Many sufferers relieve nagging backache quickly, once they discover that the real cause of their trouble may be tired kidneys.

The kidneys are Nature's chief way of taking the excess acids and waste out of the blood. They help most people pass about 3 pints a day.

When disorder of kidney function permits poisonous matter to remain in your blood, it may cause nagging backache, rheumatic pains, leg pains, loss of pep and energy, getting up nights, swelling, puffiness under the eyes, headaches and dizziness. Frequent or scanty passages with smarting and burning sometimes shows there is something wrong with your kidneys or bladder.

Don't wait! Ask your druggist for Doan's Pills, a stimulant diuretic, used successfully by millions for over 40 years. Doan's give happy relief and will help the 15 miles of kidney tubes flush out poisonous waste from your blood. Get Doan's Pills. *(Adv.)*

Gulf. That's why they drygulched Caruthers."

"Won't do 'em any good, if they killed the boss," said Brent. "I'm takin' over for Filly and her mother, and I'll run it."

"That's what I mean." Hatfield nodded. "Watch yore step, Brent. Slade's furious because we used the A C as a base to operate ag'in him. If he owns it, as well as Olsen's, nobody could come near him. That's how he figgers, anyways. And he won't rest till he sees my scalp nailed over the door."

As far as Slade knew, Hatfield was the one man who could wreck his position. Posing as a U. S. marshal, Slade could learn of all plans to capture his gang of thieves, and gain other vital information.

Brent had to take over the reins of running the big ranch. He stepped into Caruthers' shoes, and gave the orders that morning to the men. But he cautioned them to stay together, and to work close to the house. He held half a dozen cowboys at the ranch, acting as guards in case Slade dared attack.

The doctor arrived in the middle of the day, with the messenger who had been sent for him. Brent waited, on pins and needles, for Philomena to come from the sick room and tell him what the physician had to say.

At last she appeared. Her face was pale from strain and her pretty eyes showed the lack of sleep, but he thought she seemed relieved as she approached him.

"He has a chance, Dan," she said. "The next day or two will tell."

Brent seized her hand.

"He's goin' to get well, honey, I know he is! Now, why don't you go have a nap? It'll do yuh more good than anything. Tell yore dad not to worry over things. I'll run the ranch till he's up and at it agin."

"Oh, Dan, you're a wonderful comfort."

Brent hugged her and kissed her cheek. And as she clung to him, Brent knew that he adored Filly, that he would die for her.

There was plenty of work around the place, and Brent was busy. Caruthers passed the crisis, but he would have to lie up for weeks, perhaps months, for a lung had been damaged by the drygulcher bullet. It was up to Dan Brent to keep the A C operating.

As the days passed, and no attack came from Morton Slade's gang, Brent began to relax so far as that quarter went. There were tasks which had to be accomplished on the range. Riders that Brent sent out, to check the road and see if the enemy might be lurking near, reported back that they had ridden all the way to Whichway without encountering opposition.

Bill Tate was not at home. Probably he was hiding, for a stranger was tending bar and the Mexican woman was taking care of the store. There were no strangers hanging around the settlement on the treacherous river. Olsen's, Brent's former home, was still deserted.

Brent talked it over with Hatfield.

"Yuh reckon Slade's quit and gone somewheres else?" he asked.

"Slade ain't the sort to give up so easy," said Hatfield. "He's set on holdin' this route, and the Ace controls it. We'll hear from him soon. In another day or two I'll be able to ride, and I'll go after the cuss."

DAN BRENT slept until midnight. Then he rose and, buckling on his gun, went to take a tour of guard duty. He still kept sentries out, three of them, at Hatfield's insistence.

The moon was late coming up. Night insects shrilled in the thickets down by the creek. In the distance, cattle bawled. There was a faint light burning in Adam Caruthers' room, for his wife and Philomena never left him alone, day or night.

It was cool, with a little breeze coming from the west. Brent and two A C cowboys were on duty, one man posted on the road, another toward the creek, and Brent himself watching close to the buildings.

The moon rose and the barn, the stables and other structures cast black shadows. Brent yawned. He was bored, standing or sitting around, watching for possible enemies.

He strolled to the end of the bunkhouse, then crossed to the big squarish barn. The range stretched out to the north and east, and he leaned his elbows on a corral fence for a time, looking at it. Then he rolled a cigarette, lighted it, bending from the wind with the match cupped in one strong hand.

Whistling softly, Brent moved on his slow patrol. At four A.M. he would be relieved—he had felt he must do a tour, and not take advantage of the fact that he was foreman.

He thought of Philomena, of their future life together. Brent was happy, and the world before him was filled with the wondrous expectation of joy which youth and youth alone can conjure up.

When Caruthers was well, he decided, he

would ask the old man for Filly. They would be married, and he would set up again at his little ranch. He thought he could get it back, with Olsen gone, but if not, he would start another place.

He rounded the corner of the barn, away from the bunkhouse, and moved in the shadows. At the next corner, just as he made the turn, something hit him with the vicious, killing power of a springing panther, and the cry he attempted died in his throat.

The world seemed to explode. For a brief space of time Brent was aware of flashes before his eyes, then he lost all consciousness, a limp heap on the earth.

CHAPTER XIV

Search

THE next morning, Johnny Sevenup came into the bunkhouse and walked over to Jim Hatfield who lay in his bunk, enjoying the delicious warmth of the bed and a last catnap before rising.

"Have you seen Brent around this morning?" inquired Johnny.

"No, I ain't, Johnny. I thought he'd got up before I woke. Heard some stirrin's around but I wouldn't open my eyes. Too comfortable."

"He had a tour of guard from midnight till four," said Johnny. "Fellers who took over then thought Brent had gone over to the house. Filly was askin' for him."

The odors of breakfast cooking came from the kitchens. The Chinese was hard at work, getting ready for the youthful appetites of the A C punchers. Eleanor Caruthers was fixing a meal for her injured husband.

Hatfield rose, dressed, and buckled on his gun-belt. He went outside, to wash up at the pump, and drew in deep draughts of the cool, fragrant morning air. The sun was just coming up.

Philomena called to him from the back door of the ranch house.

"Oh, Jim!"

He went to join her, and she looked up into the gray-green eyes.

"Mornin', ma'am. Yuh look mighty fine today."

"Have you seen Dan?" she asked.

"No'm."

"He's not around the ranch. Nor at the horse corral."

"Yuh reckon he rode out somewheres?" asked Hatfield.

He did not wish to alarm her, unnecessarily. Brent might have taken an early morning run on Banner.

But, leaving Philomena, he began making inquiries himself. No one had seen Brent since he had gone on duty just after midnight. The tour had been quiet, the other two sentries said. They had ridden as directed, and had heard nothing, seen nothing to alarm them. At four o'clock, three sleepy young fellows had come out and taken over, and Brent had not even been missed. Banner was in the corral.

When breakfast was over, and Brent had not yet shown up, the Ranger was alarmed. He searched every nook and corner but there was no sign of Dan Brent, and the wrangler said that there were no mustangs gone from the night corral. Besides, Brent's saddle hung from its regular peg.

He found Philomena dissolved in tears, trying to hide her panic from her parents and the world.

"Don't worry," he said. "We'll find him, ma'am."

But she was not to be comforted. "They've carried him off, killed him!" she declared. "I've had a feeling all along they'd do it, just as they tried to kill Father. I haven't felt easy for a minute since they drygulched Dad." She started into his set face. "Will you look for him, Jim? I wish I could go myself."

"I'll be ridin', Filly," he said firmly. "Keep yore chin up, will yuh? If Slade really got Brent—which I don't say he has—he ain't killed him. They'd let him lie if they'd knifed him in the dark, wouldn't they?" He was talking against time, trying to hearten the stricken girl.

"Perhaps," she murmured.

He touched her hand.

"Have yore segundo, Ned Watson, take charge," he said. "Be shore yuh keep guards out, to protect yore father and the ranch. I may be gone a while."

He left her then, and strode toward the corral where Goldy ran.

Hatfield's power had returned. His shoulder was stiff but the wound had healed and his fine condition had brought him back to full strength.

"Slade's behind this," he thought grimly. "He's taken Brent." And he was not sure

that Brent was not already dead.

Quietly the Ranger contacted Watson, the segundo at the A C, a sturdy man of forty with brownish hair and a round head.

"Have the boys saddle up, as though goin' out to work," Hatfield said. "We'll make a needle search of the gullies and chaparral near the ranch, Watson. Brent might be lyin' in some hole where they dumped him, savvy?"

Watson nodded. The Ranger went to the horse corral, and his keen eye sighted the burnt match stick by the fence. He stooped. There were a few tiny brown grains, which he identified as tobacco, close to the little stick. In the soft earth under the rail was a boot heel indentation, as though someone had stood here to roll a cigarette.

"Might have been Brent," he decided. "He was over this way." The tobacco shreds were fresh. Had they been lying there through the previous day, the hot afternoon sun would have dried them out. And the heel print, too, was unweathered.

HE SOUGHT to follow the bit of sign. But the dirt was beaten down and it was not until he reached the barn corner that he saw another faint indentation made by a heel, matching the one under the fence rail. He went on around the barn, his eyes hunting for tell-tales.

At the south side he thought the earth was freshly disturbed. A close search yielded a shirt button, which had threads and a small bit of gray flannel attached, as though it had been violently pulled from its moorings.

He shook his head. It looked as though someone, probably Brent, had been attacked here, and but a few hours ago.

He collected the Ace men, told them what he had discovered. For hours they searched, in ever widening circles, for Brent's body, thinking that after he had been killed he might have been tossed into some gully or clump of brush.

But Brent had vanished. They found no traces.

Hatfield did not wish to leave the A C too thinly manned. Slade, hiding out, might be seeking to draw them off so he could strike. He picked two young cowboys, Johnny Sevenup and a slim lad called "Yammy," and made for the main road.

"Now, boys, keep an eye peeled," he warned. "Slade had patrols on the highway when I come through a few days ago."

But as mile after mile rolled off behind them, as they moved eastward toward Whichway and the Gulf coast, they saw no enemies. Hatfield wished to check up on Olsen's, so they rode cautiously along the lane leading to Brent's former ranch. Hatfield was in the van, pistol drawn in case of a sudden ambush. Some paces behind came Yammy, and then Johnny Sevenup.

Reaching the shack, they found it deserted. There was not the slightest sign that the enemy had been in the vicinity within the past few days.

"Now what, Ranger?" asked Johnny, rolling a smoke.

"We'll try Whichway next."

The afternoon was well along when they reached the lower valley and started toward the little cluster of buildings. They were in a triangular formation, Hatfield at the point, his two aides to the rear and to his right and left.

"Ain't many hosses at the racks," called Yammy.

Circling, they checked the rear of the structures. All seemed peaceful in Whichway. Smoke issued from the chimney of the living quarters behind the general store.

"I'll go in, boys," said Hatfield. "Yammy, you come to the door and cover me. Johnny, you stay on yore hoss and watch from there."

Gun drawn, the tall officer went in the open saloon door.

Bill Tate was not there. Behind the bar was an old Mexican with gray hair and mustache. Outside the bar were a couple of cowboys from a ranch not far away. Yammy knew them, and called to them. There were also three older men who lived in Whichway.

"I want to see Tate, senor," Hatfield said to the barkeeper.

The Mexican shook his head.

"No here," he said. He had a dull eye, was unarmed, and did not look at all dangerous. "He go." He waved a brown hand.

"Tate ain't been around for days, that's a fact," volunteered a townsman. "Gasca there is his father-in-law, and has took over till Tate shows up. There was some trouble here one night, shootin' and a big fight, and they say Tate's in trouble with some U. S. marshal who was hangin' around. He's flew the coop."

The Mexican woman was at the store counter, and with her was the lad who acted as Tate's wrangler and helper. The youth, Tate's brother-in-law, looked frightened, and so did Tate's wife. They did not know where

Tate had gone, or when he might return. And they had never heard of Brent, by name.

Hatfield and his aides searched the settlement, investigating the empty loft, the stable, all possible hiding places.

"I believe the Mexicans are tellin' the truth, boys," said Hatfield at last. "Tate's run off. And Slade's pulled out—for the time bein', that is. I don't savvy his game, but I reckon it may be to throw us off guard till he's ready to strike ag'in. Some of 'em must have been sneakin' around the A C last night, and kidnaped Brent."

"I'm mighty hungry," said Yammy, and Hatfield realized that night was at hand.

"S'pose we have a drink and a bite," suggested the Ranger, "and I'll decide what to try next."

WHEN they had finished the meal, Hatfield had reached his decision.

"I'm ridin' on a ways," he said, "and scoutin' toward the Gulf, boys. You two ride on home and tell Miss Filly I'll keep huntin' till I locate Brent, savvy? Raise her hopes up."

He had weighed taking the pair along, and had decided against it because on a long run their mustangs could not keep up with Goldy. If he ran into Slade and the main gang of thieves, two men would not be able to turn the tide, and he would have to depend on the sorrel's speed and stamina. The risk of being picked off by a drygulcher along the way was increased, but this did not counterbalance the advantages gained in traveling alone.

In the darkness he took leave of Yammy and Johnny Sevenup, who turned back toward the A C. The Ranger splashed his horse across the river ford and moved swiftly eastward on the Gulf trail.

"They used to drive this route regular," he murmured to Goldy. "Mebbe we can pick up news of 'em if we push along."

After midnight he pulled off the road and camped for a few hours' sleep. He breakfasted on jerked beef and hardtack at dawn and, saddling up, resumed the run.

The road ran through swampy country, and the brush was thick. He was alert, his keen eyes sweeping the bush at every bend. And he kept watching the clay road, but saw no fresh tracks of large parties. He passed a few small, isolated dwellings, but the land was of not much account and there were no large ranches past the A C.

The sun grew blistering hot in the afternoon, and he paused to rest his horse and himself for a time. He was pushing on, with diminishing hope that Brent might have come this way.

There were hoofprints, but of one or two riders at a time, no sign a gang might have come through. When he inquired at a settler's little cabin, he could gain no helpful information.

CHAPTER XV

The Sprite

AFTER dark Hatfield sighted the lights of a small town and, riding in, reconnoitered. There were two saloons, a livery stable, stores, and two dozen homes. It was not much larger than Whichway. But even discreet inquiry at the saloons got him exactly nowhere.

He spent the night near the settlement. It was at a crossroads. A highway came in from northwest, joining the east-west route to the Gulf.

The following morning he was making ready to move on when his keen ear caught the beat of many hoofs on the road. He crept forward through the underbrush, and waited. After a few minutes mustangs appeared, shaking manes and tails, snorting and crowding one another. Men were driving them.

There were perhaps fifty horses in the bunch, and the brand they wore was an ILO. The Ranger happened to know the ranch, a large spread far north of Whichway. The drovers were heavily armed, bearded and dirty from a swift, hard run.

Hatfield studied the fierce faces as well as he could, as they passed. He believed that he had seen a couple of the men before, in Tate's Saloon, when he had first stopped there. He counted ten riders, a good many for so small a bunch of animals.

"This gang's been workin' another section, I s'pose," he decided. "They're shore hogs. Slade's cleanin' out east Texas!"

Whether they would lead him to Brent he did not know, but it was the first sign of the enemy he had had since leaving the A C.

He let them get a head start. He could stay on the trail of such a large band easily enough.

The Ranger, watching every possible am-

bush point, moved after the gang. He rode several miles behind them, careful that they never spied him, and alert for a possible guard on their back-trail, a favorite trick of Slade's killers.

But evidently they believed themselves safe, such a long distance from the point where they had picked up the mustangs. They drove fast, and as the sun was reddening behind the Ranger, he paused on a slight rise and saw them driving on to a waterfront town which lay on a salt-water lagoon.

"Port Blackton," he murmured.

There lay the muddy harbor waters, and beyond was the sparkling blue of the Gulf. A stone breakwater extended out, providing safe anchorage for many ships, and masts of vessels stuck up like a leafless forest.

There were numbers of small craft tied to the piers or pulled up on shore, while steamships, auxiliaries and sailing ships lay at the wharves, crowded with bales of cotton, with great stacks of hides, crates and boxes, all sorts of cargoes.

The Ranger sniffed the salt air. Lagoons and swamps where the ocean encroached on the land surrounded the port, making the atmosphere heavy, dank. The houses were crowded close together, with the streets narrow, twisting, and muddy. Smoke from steamer stacks and from chimneys mingled in the sky.

The mustangs were driven to some pens near the waterfront. Animals on the hoof made up a large percentage of shipments from the Gulf ports. Here the range met the equally distinctive sea. Texas provided beef and mounts, and marketing, the sale of his product, was the final consummation of a cowman's hard, dangerous work. He must turn his cows or horses into money, and there were always buyers at the seaports, ready to pay cash.

Animals were then shipped to New Orleans, up the Mississippi, or to New York and northern points, to satisfy hungry factory workers and others, or to provide riding horses.

Dark had fallen when Jim Hatfield entered Port Blackton. Lights had come on in the homes and saloons, and blinkers in the lighthouses and beacons pointed out reefs or bars and the proper channel.

He made his way carefully toward the pens where he had seen the drovers leave the horses. He dropped Goldy's reins over the rack in front of a waterfront bar, and strode on a boardwalk toward the corrals.

A gate led from the side of the pens onto a pier. To one berth of the dock was warped a slim black ship, fore-and-aft rigged, with two high masts. She had a fat, low stack as well, showing she boasted auxiliary engines. The schooner had a fancy mermaid prow, and he could read her name, "THE SPRITE," done in large, gilt letters. She had the look of a well-kept vessel.

The riders who had brought in the mustangs were gone, lost in the mysterious depths of the port. Negro stevedores, singing as they labored, were loading the Sprite, and sailors, in close-fitting jerseys and bell-bottom trousers, were on the deck, assisting.

The horses were being urged into the hold across a railed gang-plank.

HATFIELD was able, without showing himself in the bright light from the lanterns hanging on poles on the dock and on the ship, to draw quite near. It seemed to be a confused mêlée, but there was order in it.

The mates were up there, directing the work, and lording it over all, from the bridge, was a blunt man with a wide body. He wore a captain's hat, and dark uniform. By the ship's lights, Hatfield could see the black-bearded face, and he had no difficulty at all in hearing the skipper's voice whenever that worthy bawled a command. It had the carrying power of a Texas rancher's tones.

The mates were only a shade less tough than the skipper, and their vocabularies were rich with so many profanities that each one of them could swear for minutes without repeating himself. Fascinated by the scene, the Ranger leaned against a warehouse wall to watch, and listen.

Steers bawled from the Sprite's interior and horses whinnied in alarm at being confined to the dark, strange quarters of the ship's holds.

"Got a bunch of animals aboard," mused Hatfield.

The Negro stevedores, chanting their mournful melodies, were carrying big wooden boxes up another gangplank amidships, and a ship's mate was directing the lashing of them in a space on deck. The cases were heavy. They might contain machinery—or something else, thought the Ranger.

The mustangs were soon taken aboard, and the sailors began to close the hatch.

"Cap'n Munce, sir," sang out a mate, look-

ing up to the blunt figure on the bridge, "what'll we do with them all-fired-blasted-cussed cows? Number One's full up, sir."

The black-bearded face looked down as Captain Munce brooded.

"Have the carpenter rig a jury pen on the foc's'l head, Mr. Frye," he finally said.

"Aye aye, sir."

Hatfield was sure he had discovered one of Morton Slade's outlets for the horses that the thieves under Slade's command had been stealing from Texas. The Sprite was a seagoing vessel, and might be sailing to foreign ports. She was low in the water, heavily laden. She was certainly carrying beef and mounts, and perhaps in those heavy cases were ammunition and weapons.

Hooked up with such a gang as Slade's, Captain Munce might be gun-running, supplying subversive forces against the United States or a friendly government. Such smuggling was of a deep concern to Federal officials, and U. S. marshals, such as the deceased Hogan, would certainly be interested if they learned of the matter.

"Mebbe Marshal Hogan got to close, and Slade caught him at work," decided Hatfield.

The Ranger waited. Another hour passed, and carpenter hammers banged out a temporary pen forward to accommodate the small bunch of mournfully lowing cattle up the dock. Hatfield kept hoping that Morton Slade would appear, or perhaps Tate.

To arrest Munce and seize the Sprite now would warn Slade, perhaps permit him to escape, and the Ranger was determined above all to catch up with the chief of the horse thieves.

"Mr. Frye!"

Captain Munce's powerful voice reached over the sound of the hammers, the cattle calls and the other noises around the ship.

"Aye aye, sir!"

"I'm going ashore, Mr. Frye," sang out Munce. "Take charge. I want everything ready when I return. We sail at four on the tide."

"Aye aye, sir."

There was a damp coolness in the sea breeze, and Captain Munce strode down the gangplank wearing a blue peajacket. He rolled as he walked purposefully up the cobbled street.

Hatfield trailed Munce. Perhaps the skipper would lead him to Slade.

Munce turned into a brightly lighted bar and eating house. The sign over the door said, "THE GULF SKIPPER." It was a tavern where ship captains and officers ate and drank while in port.

Hatfield could look through the steam-damp window up front, and see the cozy interior, the sawdust on the floor, the dark mahogany bar. Brass ship's lanterns served as lights. Pictures of clipper ships and other nautical scenes decorated the brown-painted walls. An appetizing odor came from the doorway.

Captain Munce had greeted a friend, another seafaring man, and they stood at the center of the bar. The tables were crowded, and white-aproned waiters and barkeepers served the customers. A hum of talk mingled with the clatter of dishes and the soft strains from a fiddle and guitar, played by musicians in the rear.

JIM HATFIELD hunted for Slade's familiar figure, but the back of the tavern was cut off by a partition, and so far as he could see the Gulf Skipper contained only seafaring men. Then Munce rolled toward the rear, and waved to someone behind the partition.

"Might be Slade," thought Hatfield.

He stepped inside, alert, ready. Following Munce, when he reached the opening he could see past the break. Munce had only waved to another sea captain, and Slade was not there.

Dan Brent was foremost in Hatfield's mind. He had to find Brent, if the young fellow still lived. And he must round up Slade and his gang.

Munce had turned, and as he came back he saw the tall Ranger. His black-bearded face broke into a smile, and he nodded.

" 'Evenin', sir. My name's Tolliver Munce—sea cap'n by trade. I see you hail from the cow country."

"Howdy, Cap'n," drawled the Ranger.

"Step up to the bar and have a drink—on me, sir," insisted Munce. He spoke to a fat bartender. "Set 'em up for a gent from the range, Carmody."

"Big or little, Cap'n Munce?" asked Carmody.

"Big, most certainly."

Carmody turned to take clean glasses off a shelf under the bar mirror, his fat body interposing itself between Hatfield and the shelf. He pulled the cork from a fresh bottle of whisky, and poured two large glasses to the brim, setting one before Munce, the

other before Hatfield. Munce raised his.

"To the range and the fine men who run it, sir," he cried.

Hatfield drank with the skipper.

"My turn, Cap'n." he said then. "Set 'em up again, Carmody."

Munce was decidedly friendly. There was admiration in his eyes as he looked up at the tall fellow.

"They made a man when they made you, sir," he said. "No offense—and no flattery intended."

Off his ship, Tolliver Munce seemed to be a social sort, easy to get along with. But Hatfield believed that Munce had a connection with Slade, if only a business one. Slade might be in the town, and he wished to look through the saloons for the horse thieves.

"I'll have to be movin', Cap'n," he said, "and thanks for the drink."

The atmosphere of the Gulf Skipper was thick, with blue tobacco smoke from strong-smelling pipes and from Cuban cheroots. The odors of beer and whisky, of fried foods wafted together, and Hatfield suddenly felt it obnoxious. He yearned for the fresh air.

"I'll see you again, cowboy," said Munce. "Good luck."

"Luck to you," said Hatfield, surprised to find his voice was thick.

He moved out the door. The sea breeze was in his face as he turned up the sidewalk. He paused, put a hand against the dark wall of a building to steady himself, and shook his head. Lights flashed in front of his eyes.

"Funny!" he thought. "Only had two drinks."

He knew he was going to collapse, but he could not fight off the overpowering sensation. As his knees gave way, he realized that men had seized his arms from behind, but that was all he could remember.

CHAPTER XVI

A Sea Voyage

UNEASILY Jim Hatfield groaned, and grunted, as consciousness came back. He was still dizzy. At least it seemed to him that he was rolling back and forth, and pitching. And creaking sounds filled his ears. Dimly he could hear voices.

He was horribly thirsty, his tongue swollen, his mouth like flannel. The light was not good, and the air had a queer smell, of sweated bodies, of tar, of strange odors he did not recognize.

As his befuddled senses cleared, he found he was lying doubled up in a dirty bunk which was too small for his long body.

"Ugh—ah-h-h!" Across the dark space from him, someone else was complaining, groaning and swearing in a low, dazed way.

Hatfield sat up. His head hit the upper bunk, because there was only a few inches clearance for his body to slip through. He had on his leather pants and shirt, but his hat was gone, and so were his spurred boots and guns. He felt for his Ranger star, then remembered he had left it in his bunk at the A C.

Suddenly, his brain clearing, he knew where he was.

"By Jupe, I'm aboard a ship!"

But he heard cattle lowing, and heavy sounds above.

He slid out, bare feet on the deck, and held himself from being thrown off balance by a slim hand on the upper bunk. There were sleeping sailors in some of the beds.

The Ranger knew that he had been shanghaied, drugged, somehow, and brought aboard the vessel.

"Munce!" he thought. "But how'd he work it?"

Then he thought back, and guessed that Carmody, the fat bartender, might be a tool of Munce's. He could recall how Carmody's body had cut off the glasses he had picked from the bar shelf. Perhaps Carmody had knockout drops all ready in special glasses, when Munce or another crony gave a signal.

A sliding door opened, and the sunlight streamed in. A heavy figure was framed in the rectangle, and Hatfield recognized Mr. Frye, Munce's first mate. Frye, a dignified, large person, saw the tall figure standing by the bunk.

"So you've come to," he said gruffly. "All right. You've hade enough of a loaf. Out on deck. You'll have to work your way."

Hatfield did not attempt to argue. The captain and his officers were all-powerful at sea, with a life and death hold over those under their discipline. Guns gone, in an unfamiliar setting, the Ranger was helpless.

"If Slade ain't aboard, I'm lucky," he thought, as he climbed the steep ladder to the deck.

Mr. Frye had gone into the forecastle, was

shaking the man on the port side who had been grunting and groaning.

"Wake up, you. You're all right. On deck!"

Hatfield gripped a handrail, bare feet on the smooth deck. Close at hand was a pen made of planks nailed in a square, and in this were the extra steers which had been driven aboard the ship the night before. Amidships were the lashed boxes, and on a bucket and a lifeboat he saw the name "Sprite."

The sun sparkled on the brilliant sea, rolling, touched by whitecaps as the wind picked up. Gulls and other seabirds showed they were not far from land. In the west distance he saw a low, purple line which he stared at hungrily.

The Sprite had her mainsail spread, and a jib out. She was a good seaboat, but heavily laden as she was, the seas made her wallow. The engines had been shut off. No doubt they had been used to bring her through the harbor channel to the open Gulf.

By the sun, Hatfield knew they were sailing southward but to what port he could not guess.

"This way, my man," said Frye's gruff voice.

Hatfield thought the mate was addressing him. He turned, and his jaw dropped, for staggering behind Frye came Dan Brent!

"Dan!" cried the Ranger.

The tall bronc-buster was pale around the gills. He had a lump on his head, and blinked his eyes. He had a headache, just as Hatfield did. He stared for a moment at Hatfield with the same disbelief which the Ranger had felt on seeing Brent on the ship.

"Jim! How—how'd you get here! Is Filly okay?"

"Same way you did, I reckon. Filly's all right, and so's Adam."

"Come, come, this ain't no old ladies sewin' circle," snapped Mr. Frye. "Aft, both of you!"

HATFIELD started toward the rear of the Sprite, but as he passed in front of Frye, the mate cursed and struck him a hard blow with a fist like a mule's hoof. It knocked the unsteady Ranger across the deck, where he brought up against a stanchion.

"Never step to windward of an officer," said Frye. "I don't like the way you smell."

The mate had a large pistol strapped at his waist, and just to be sure, he seized an iron belaying pin from a nearby rack and dog-eyed Hatfield. But the Ranger was too experienced to fight against fate and could only bide his time.

"Yes, suh," he drawled. "I'll have to get onto yore ways, I reckon."

"I reckon you will and mighty soon," Frye said grimly.

He herded them toward the quarterdeck, and Captain Munce turned, looking down at them from a raised bridge section.

"Here they are, Cap'n," said Mr. Frye respectfully.

"Good mornin', men," said Munce. His voice was firm but decent enough. "You're on my ship now, and under my command. You'll take orders from me and from my mates, Mr. Frye and Mr. Allison. Long as you behave and do your work, we won't have any trouble. In fact, we won't have any trouble, anyhow, understand?"

"Yes suh," drawled the Ranger, and the miserable Brent nodded.

"Say 'Aye aye, sir,' " ordered Frye, poking Brent in the ribs with the belaying pin.

Brent complied. There were sailors about. They grinned at the strange figures of the two cowboys who had begun to feel the motion of the ship.

But Munce held a strict discipline aboard his ship. The skipper and his officers were armed, watchful, experienced, and they could kill a man without the slightest fear of answering for it ashore.

A seaman brought buckets of water and stiff brushes, and under Mr. Frye's stern eye —it was the first mate's watch—Hatfield and Brent began to scrub, scrub and scrub, until the deck shone.

Hatfield wished to talk with Brent, but was unable to speak much with him, since Frye or a crew member always seemed to be watching. Tired from the unusual labors, they went off duty three hours later with the rest of the watch, and trailed the sailors into the galley.

"I ain't got much appetite, Jim," said Brent.

"Me either, but hot coffee'll go good. Try and drink some, Dan."

They were able to converse, in low tones.

"How'd you happen to be aboard, Jim?" asked Brent.

"I was on yore trail, tryin' to locate you," said Hatfield, "and I follered some hoss thieves to this ship. Then Munce had me

drugged. And you? They grabbed yuh at the ranch, didn't they?"

"That's right. They struck me down. Next thing I knew I was on a hoss, slung over it and tied hand and foot. They fetched me here. There was only a couple of 'em, and they hid up in the woods durin' the days. Finally they brought me aboard, give me somethin' to drink, and I passed out again."

"Reckon Munce needs hands. This is a tough ship."

Desertions, the low pay and hard fare of a seaman, kept such masters as Tolliver Munce chronically short-handed. They all made use of the services of crimps like Carmody, to fill out their depleted crew rosters.

Dan Brent had been smuggled to the ship by Slade's orders. At sea, it was safer than a prison to keep Brent from escaping. As for Hatfield, Munce obviously had taken a fancy to him because of his size, and even though he was no sailor, the captain had a use for him.

"I reckon I'll see more of them mustangs and steers they got aboard," he mused, as he drank some of the coffee.

It tasted like boiler dishwater and was chiefly chicory, the only thing to be said for it being that it was warm. Sailors at the table were stowing away fat salt pork and beans, and hard biscuits. Some had private flasks of whisky.

After mess, Brent and Hatfield were permitted to go below and rest. The bronc-buster was at the bottom of his youthful spirits. Hatfield gave him more details as to the A C and those Brent loved.

"This is a terrible boat," complained Dan miserably. He was seasick and aware that he was in the hands of the deadly Slade.

"At least Slade hisself ain't aboard," said Hatfield, trying to cheer him.

"But he savvies I'm here, Jim, and Munce'll tell him you are, too. Don't know why he saved me, but it wasn't because he's kind-hearted."

"Wait'll we land, Dan," whispered Hatfield, for there were sailors about the forecastle. "Then we'll escape."

"Better get some shut-eye, you land-lubbers," advised a tar. "You'll be at it agin in a few hours."

THE time seemed all too short before they did again go on watch.

"You—and you!" said Mr. Frye, pointing at Hatfield and Brent. "Water the cattle and horses. Step to it, now. You're cowboys, ain't you? I'll hold you responsible for 'em."

There were animals on deck and in the holds, and the two lugged buckets of water from big wooden tanks to the troughs.

"These mustangs don't like the ship any better'n we do," said Brent sympathetically.

The breeze was fair and the Sprite made good progress. So long as there was good wind, Munce did not use his auxiliary engine.

It seemed to Hatfield and Brent they had barely fallen into an uneasy doze when they were once more routed out and none too gently. The watches were four hours each, until the two-hour dogwatches which were designed to change the hours the port and starboard watches were on deck.

"We can make ourselves useful, Dan," said Hatfield, "by nursin' these animals for Munce. Figger we may live longer that-away."

It blew up during the night and the Gulf was choppy. The ship's new motion further disturbed Brent and the Ranger, who were not used to it. However, they were young and strong, and the gyrations of a bucking mustang were more violent than the pitching, yawning and rolling of the Sprite. They could stand it.

CHAPTER XVII

Slade's Here

MUNCE was a masterful sailor and knew how to handle his ship. He proved that when a squall hit about dawn. Monkey-like tars shinned up and down ropes and ladders with agility that aroused Hatfield's admiration, as they took in or put out sail.

When the squall had passed, the wind dropped. Munce put out more sails. In the afternoon he ordered the engine started.

During the second night, the Sprite stopped, and dropped anchor.

Going about his duties on deck, Hatfield could make out the loom of black, which he was sure was the shore, over the starboard rail. When it was light enough to see, he realized that the Sprite was anchored a mile off the coast. A long finger of land curved out and around, making a bay and a fine anchorage for small ships. It was one of the

myriad indentations along the Gulf coast.

He stared hungrily at the shore. A strip of sandy beach shone yellow, as the sun rose. There were woods and trails in there, and it was wild country.

"Must be eastern Mexico," he decided. "We shore passed the mouth of the Rio Grande last night."

Captain Munce was calling orders, and anchor was pulled up. The engines were making the Sprite vibrate, and slowly Munce worked the ship in. Landmarks showed him the channel, and he turned the ship down the bay, inside the peninsula. Now the Ranger, holding to the rail near the galley, could see the pier which extended into the sheltered waters. A little river emptied into the sea, and had made a narrow channel, deep enough to accommodate such a ship as the Sprite.

A sailor was heaving the lead, calling the depths. The leadline was marked with leather strips, white cotton rag, or red woolen rag, according to the fathoms.

"Mark Seventeen— By the Deep Sixteen— Mark Fifteen—"

It was shoaling off. Munce was checking the depths, for such a stream as entered the

[*Turn page*]

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bay often brought down sand and topsoil enough to build up a bar in a few days.

The pier was made of log piles and rough planks. It was narrow, with a railing to keep animals from sliding off into the water.

Ashore were some rough shacks, made of native brush and logs, and several brown canvas tents. On the beach lay boxes, and there were big corrals inland, where horses and cattle could be held. Several figures, some in steeple sombreros and white garments, awaited the docking of the Sprite.

Captain Munce brought her in easily, slowly. The leadline told the depth of the water, brown here from the silt the stream carried.

"By the Mark Seven— By the Deep Six—"

The Sprite had almost stopped moving, and they were near enough to cast the lines to those on the pier.

The ship was carefully warped in, and the gangplank let down.

Brent joined the Ranger at the rail.

"I feel a lot better," he said, "now we ain't heavin' around so. What yuh figger on doin'? This is a mighty wild spot. Must be Mexico. Don't yuh think so?"

"Yeah. It's a depot of some sort. We—Look out, here comes Frye."

"You two—get the animals ready to unload," roared the mate. "Take the lead out of it now. Step lively!"

There were armed men ashore, confederates of Munce's. All day they unloaded the ship. The mustangs had to be coaxed onto the narrow pier and taken to the ready corrals. Steers were driven to other pens. The big boxes and crates had to be handled by manpower, for there were no derricks here.

The sun was boiling hot, but Munce drove the men through the heat of it. Watched constantly by the skipper or Frye, Hatfield and Brent worked harder than anybody else. Both were powerful fellows, and skilled at handling the stolen mustangs and cows.

"Ugh," growled Brent, wiping the sweat from his eyes. "Now I see why Munce saved us!"

They had not the slightest chance to attempt escape during the day. When they would herd a bunch of horses ashore, they would be sent back for more while Mexicans would haze the animals to the pens.

At dark they were permitted to go below to sleep, and Dan Brent was totally exhausted. He had not had a decent sleep for days, and strong as he was, he was at the end of the tether. The Ranger, too, had to sleep, to recover his power.

The work of unloading was resumed in the morning. Close to noon, a large party of horsemen appeared at the depot, and the Ranger paused, watching them dismount.

ONE was a huge Mexican, with bandoleers crossed on his mighty chest. His clothing was red velvet, his wide silk sash purple, and his steeple sombrero glinted with rows of pearl buttons. He had a broad face, with a thick black waxed mustache.

His companion, as the two came striding out on the pier, spurs clanking, was seen to be a lean cadaverous American with a twisted, vicious face. Obviously a renegade. Both were heavily armed.

"Howdy, Cap'n Munce!" sang out the American. "How's things?"

"Buenos días, Capitán!" The big Mexican grinned, his white teeth gleaming. "Senor Slade, he ees come weeth you?"

"No, he ain't aboard, gents," replied Munce, "but he'll be along by this afternoon, I reckon."

The skipper invited the two visitors into his cabin. They were carrying big leather bags, and they kept these with them, entering the roomy captain's quarters aft aboard the Sprite. Ports and windows were open, in the hot air. The captain's steward was on hand, serving food and drinks.

"Slade's comin', Dan," whispered the Ranger to his friend.

"It was nice knowin' yuh," said Brent drily, with a shrug.

They were kept at work through the afternoon. Munce's guests were weary, evidently from long riding to reach the rendezvous, for after dinner they took a siesta which lasted far into the afternoon.

"Did yuh note the two hosses that Mexican and his pard rode up on, Dan?" asked the Ranger, as the two limped back to the ship after carrying ashore a heavy box.

"Yeah, beauties, Jim. That black stallion could fly, I'll bet! And the gray devil could near keep up with him!"

"They're way over the other animals, and no mustang could keep up with 'em. They're the best hosses I've seen since I left Goldy."

"Fat chance of us gettin' aboard 'em, Jim. That bandit with 'em never strays far. I s'pose he guards 'em for the two chiefs."

The sun was reddening over the Mexican wilds when a beautiful sloop coasted into the bay and came toward the wharf. It had a high

mast, with a mainsail and jib, but it was being driven by the engine.

There were four men in it, and the Ranger stared at the tall, rangy figure standing on the bow.

He turned to Brent who had stooped to pick up a load.

"Slade's here!"

"Let's keep down outa sight," said Brent. "Mebbe Slade won't notice us."

Morton Slade wore dark trousers, and a fresh shirt. He had removed the U. S. marshal's badge, with which he had fooled so many people. His thick forelock of black hair drooped under the canvas hat he had pushed back on his sharply angular head.

"They could sail that sloop with his ears," muttered the Ranger. The hate he felt for Slade welled in him, as he took in the strong, bony jaw, the firm mouth, the set of the man's features which so plainly showed his vanity.

Captain Tolliver Munce greeted Slade, as the horse thief jumped nimbly from the sloop to the pier and hurried to the gangway. There was obvious diference in Munce's manner as he smiled and shook hands with Slade.

Hatfield and Brent tried to stay out of sight, but after a short interval they were routed out by Mr. Frye, who was armed with pistol and belaying pin.

"Aft, you two," ordered Frye gruffly. "Lively, now. The skipper wants to speak to you."

Herded by the wary Frye, the Ranger and Brent walked the deck until they reached a spot on the quarterdeck near the captain's cabin. A door opened onto a raised area and on this stood Munce and Slade.

"Here they are," said Munce. "That's the turkey you sent aboard and asked me to hold for you. The other, the big 'un, I picked up in Port Blackton—needed a cowboy or two aboard to handle the animals. They know each other, the mate says."

Slade's sharply angled face was darkly scowling as he regarded Hatfield and Brent.

"Of course they do," he said, and pulled at his forelock. "A dangerous feller, the big one. Killed several of my best men, and came close to me. Yuh did a good job in takin' him, Munce."

Slade did not deign to speak directly to the prisoners. He turned away. "Put 'em under guard," they heard him order. "That big 'un's a slippery customer, Munce."

"Mr. Frye!" called the skipper.

"Aye aye, sir."

"Have those two placed in the foc's'l and I want an armed guard on 'em."

"Aye aye, sir."

A FEW minutes later, Hatfield and Brent were lying in their bunks, and a tough sailor, with a ready pistol, was sitting beside the only door. The ports were too small for a man's body to squeeze through.

Hatfield rested after the labors of the day. At mess time food was brought in tin plates and mugs from the galley, and then dark fell. A ship's lantern, casting a flickering yellow light, hung by a gilt chain from a crossbeam, and by its light they could see that the guard was alert.

None of the crew came into the forecastle. The ports were open, and the prisoners could hear shouts from ashore, yells of merrymakers which grew more and more raucous. The Ranger, gathering his strength, decided that the sailors and the gang ashore were celebrating the end of the run and the unloading.

The sentry, a squat, swarthy tar, was in a bad humor. He kept glancing toward the shore, then he would scowl at the two prisoners, who were keeping him from the sport.

Voices, too, came from the captain's quarters.

The guard rose, at last, as he heard someone passing the open door.

"Hey, George!" he called to another sailor.

George came to the entrance.

"Listen," the guard said. "I'm stuck here without a drink or nothin', George! How about gettin' me a flask?"

"All right, Zeke. I was just goin' ashore."

Soon George returned and passed a flask of whisky in to the sentinel, who resumed his seat and dog-eyed the captives.

Zeke began to drink. He smacked his lips over the liquor, and the wassail from shore, with guitar playing and singing mixed with it, made him tap his foot.

Hatfield bided his time, feigning sleep. Once Mr. Frye glanced in, to see that all was well in the forecastle.

The whisky began to effect Zeke. He had finished the flask, and the Ranger could see that the sailor's eyelids were heavy from the liquor.

But now and then Zeke would start awake, stare at him belligerently. There was nothing to do but wait.

CHAPTER XVIII

Flight

FOUR bells rang out, and Zeke glanced up, but the Ranger was apparently asleep, snoring gently in his bunk.

"Now or never," thought Hatfield, as Zeke's chin dropped lower and lower and his eyes shut.

When he put his bare feet to the deck, the bunk squeaked, and he thought Zeke was about to rouse, but the whisky had drugged the sentry. Noises on the ship, from shore, helped. And Hatfield had only a few yards to go before he reached Zeke.

Brent was watching. He waited until Hatfield made his pantherlike leap, viselike fingers clinching on Zeke's windpipe. Then the bronc-buster leaped from his bed and rushed to assist. He wrested the pistol from Zeke's relaxing hand. In moments they had Zeke gagged, trussed, and shoved him into a bunk, covering him with a blanket.

Hatfield peeked out. The deck was clear. Munce's cabin was brightly lighted, and voices came from it. There was a celebration going on there also.

They saw a blunt figure near the bow, and started quickly aft, where the captain had his quarters. Ports giving onto the deck passage were standing open, for the night was warm. Hatfield paused, peering in at the scene.

Munce, Slade, and the big Mexican and his partner sat around a circular table laden with fine foods, wines, and other liquors. They were enjoying a banquet, with roast birds, and all the trimmings. They had been drinking for hours, and were in high spirits.

The leather bags which the big Mexican and his companion had brought aboard were open, and Hatfield could see the rich gleam of gold coins.

"Gold on the barrelhead, gents," he heard the lean renegade American roar. "Gasca and me can sell five thousand hosses. We got everything rollin'."

"*Si, si.*" The grinning Gasca nodded, banging a brown fist on the table. "All de *bandidos* in Mexico buy guns and horses from Gasca and Reilly. Zey raid ze count-ree, and pay us."

"Organization's the thing, as I told yuh," said Morton Slade. "If we stick together, we'll rule Texas and north Mexico too, and take what we want. I'll soon have my main Texas depot in order—the A C Ranch—and we'll feed as many mustangs to yuh as yuh can get rid of, boys."

Brent tugged frantically at Hatfield's sleeve, but dared not speak for fear they would be overheard.

"You think you'll be able to take over in Texas?" asked Munce. "You told me you'd run into trouble, Slade."

"It's settled now," Slade said blandly. "Yuh know Brent, the cowboy yuh brought down here for me? Meant to use him as bait, if need be. But it ain't necessary now. We got Caruthers hisself. And one of my agents'll buy the place from the women. We can get rid of Brent and that big devil."

Hatfield turned, crouched in the darkness. Brent pointed at a white-coated figure, a steward bringing a heavy tray from the galley. They ducked through a passage, and the steward passed.

The Ranger and Brent knew many things now which explained a lot. Slade and Munce, hooked to Gasca and Reilly, were running a wholesale supply system for outlaw gangs. There was plenty of profit in it, for horses were as good as cash. If Slade should get the A C he would feed the mustangs his gangs stole, through to the coast, and by ship transport them where they could not be traced, for sale to bandits who would prey on Mexico and Texas.

"I hope yuh're a good swimmer, Brent," whispered the Ranger. "The gangway's guarded!"

"I can keep up. Come on—before they catch us! Slade means to have us killed!"

They found a dark spot, where a heavy line attached to a stanchion could be dropped to the brown water. Hatfield picked up a belaying pin, and thrust it into his pants belt. He put the short-nosed pistol he had taken from Zeke in his pocket. Then he and Brent went overside.

The water was warm. They paddled softly, fearful they might be heard and seen in the water near the lighted ship.

It was about two hundred yards to the main beach, and there, as Hatfield and Brent stood in waist-deep water, they could see the red fires and the dancing figures of the bandits and sailors as they drank and caroused.

"We got to have hosses, and good 'uns," panted Brent, blowing out water and shaking

himself like a big dog.

"Yuh're right," said the Ranger. "We need the best in the bunch, or that gang of killers'll catch up with us."

REGAINING their wind, the two crept along the beach, in the dark shadow of the woods. Hatfield could see the corrals, the shacks, and he looked eagerly toward the spot where he had observed Gasca's and Reilly's beautiful mounts. They were still guarded by an armed outlaw, but he was watching the celebrants on the beach.

It took an hour to circle around through the unfamiliar woods. Then Hatfield, with Brent crawling at his heels, closed in. The sentry on the two fine horses now sat with his back to the two approaching men, and against the firelight.

"They got rope bridles on 'em," whispered the Ranger. "We're in luck."

"I see a couple of saddles by that nearest shack, too!" Brent whispered back. "It's tough ridin' without a hull."

"Try for 'em, then. I'll get the hosses."

Jim Hatfield began his stalk of the horse guard. The animals were grazing, their lines dropped. Drunken men lay on the beach or cavorted in the firelight.

The Ranger's belaying pin connected with the sentry's skull, then Hatfield seized the rope bridles and quickly led the two beautiful mounts behind the shack, where Brent awaited him.

Brent had the saddles. He kept watch, as the Ranger cinched up. The mounts were skittish, mettled creatures, but they responded to Hatfield's soothing touch and low, affectionate voice.

"Let's go, Brent!" he called in a low voice.

The two skilled riders vaulted into saddles, and took a sandy trail which led inland from the beach.

"Hey, there— Halt!"

Hatfield fired, with the short-barreled pistol. The road sentry's carbine banged harmlessly in the night air. The man fell back, shrieking the alarm.

"Ride, Brent!" sang out the Ranger.

They tore along the trail, as the outlaws set up howls behind them.

How long it would be before they again saw the Ace—if ever—now was in the laps of the gods. But they were on their way!

As the hours wore on, there was pursuit, which had been expected, but the two escaping men had snatched the best horses at the outlaw depot, and their riding skill plus the strength and speed of the prize mounts spelled the difference between life and death.

Without money, and with only the small revolver which the Ranger had taken on the Sprite, Brent and Hatfield had a hard trip. Torn by thorns, burned by the hot sun, suffering for lack of any food except what berries they could pick up, they doggedly pushed north toward the Rio Grande.

Once across the Border, though, they came to a Texan's ranch, and were given warm food, clothing, and weapons with which to continue the run.

Hatfield sent Brent straight home to the A C. The Ranger himself had business at Port Blackton, and he wished to pick up Goldy.

It took him time to find the sorrel. The police had noted the beautiful golden gelding, standing patiently at the street rack, and finally had led him to the city hall stable, where the town marshals had unsaddled him, rubbed him down, fed him and held him until his owner might claim him. For all that, Hatfield was grateful.

Once he had found Goldy, though, he had still other chores before he could ride on. There were people in the seaport he wished to consult.

Hatfield was certain that Morton Slade would fight. There was too much at stake for the man to quit now. Slade would hope to destroy the A C and the Ranger before they could wreck him and his outlaw game. So the Ranger had told Brent to make preparation. But even before Hatfield rode for the Ace he learned that Slade already had sped back to Texas, and in record-breaking time.

"I could have used another twenty-four hours," thought Hatfield, as Goldy's speed ate up the miles on the run.

Time was everything. It took time to start the law functioning, to collect a large posse, to rouse and bring together cowmen hundreds of miles apart. Then the forces must be brought to bear at the proper spot and at the proper moment, to win a battle. And Hatfield knew that Slade would have gangs of killers with him, fetched from the Mexican depot and called from raiding the range.

What Brent and Hatfield had heard Slade claim, at the depot—that he was about to take over the A C through purchase—had been true, the Ranger learned as soon as he reached the Ace. Believing that Brent had been killed, and with Adam laid up for

months, Mrs. Caruthers had decided to sell the ranch—and as in all things concerned with Adam, it was her say.

SLADE'S agent, hinting that it would be dangerous to refuse, had been to the ranch. Both Mrs. Caruthers and her daughter were sick of bloodshed, and from what Slade's buyer had said, they had realized the gunmen would attack, kill Caruthers and others. To save lives, Eleanor Caruthers had agreed to accept Slade's price.

Hatfield knew why Slade wanted the A C—for a main depot on the shortest, best route to the Gulf, where his ships could transport the stolen horses and contraband to market. Slade had waxed powerful, and the interference set in motion by the Texas Ranger had become a thorn in the man's side.

As soon as the Ranger had arrived at the Ace, he and Brent had sent messengers to many ranchers, men affected by the thieving gangs under Morton Slade. Aboard Captain Munce's Sprite and at the depot, Hatfield and Brent had read the brands on the stolen animals, and knew whom to contact.

But Slade had come north swiftly, and was about to strike. Hatfield realized that only too well, and he also realized, on his second night at the Ace, that the time had come. He knew that when Johnny Sevenup, who had been sent out with others on a scouting foray, rode into the ranch.

Night enveloped the A C Ranch, and Hatfield and Dan Brent had taken up their own sentry stands near the ranchhouse. The moon had not yet risen and a brisk wind from the west pushed black cloud shapes across the starry sky.

At the moment Hatfield and Brent heard the splash of a rider crossing the ford, they raised the shotguns. Then the horsemen came on toward the ranchyard. They could see only his vague shape in the dimness.

"Halt!" ordered Brent.

"Deuces wild!" called the rider.

It was the password. Johnny Sevenup threw himself from his lathered mustang.

"Slade's comin' with an army of gunnies, Ranger!" he reported. "They're movin' fast!"

"Where are the other road sentries?" asked Hatfield.

"Comin' in! There's goin' to be one lulu of a scrap tonight, gents!"

"Bueno. Brent, we'll get everybody warned and ready. We've got to hold 'em off!"

CHAPTER XIX

Break-Up

READY for what the next hour might bring, Hatfield had a loaded double-barreled shotgun in a sling, and a brace of fine Colts which belonged to the wounded Caruthers. He had his golden sorrel saddled and waiting as he darkened the skin of his face by rubbing dirt on it.

"I'll have to break through, mebbe, and try to hurry up our allies," he decided, for he was sure that the expected cowmen could not be many miles away now.

But the van of Slade's forces was only a few miles behind the A C cowboys who had been watching for the enemy on the trails. So sure of himself was Slade that he was moving on the main highway, at full speed.

Hatfield had scouts around the ranch. And an hour after Johnny Sevenup had first reported they came in, to say that strange riders were circling the buildings.

Slade had arrived!

The enemy, however, was invisible at any distance, and Slade was keeping quiet, in the hope that he might make a surprise attack. Hatfield and Brent, acting as chiefs of the defense, had their fighters set, guns loaded, the men under cover.

Hatfield crouched in the door of the stables, from which position he could command the approach from the river ford. He had a shotgun in his hands, and Goldy was in a stall behind him. Brent was at the main house, in charge there. Others of the thin defending forces were posted about the ranch.

The Ranger strained ears and eyes. He thought he heard splashings from the shallow ford across the creek, but could not be sure. It was difficult for men, even a man like Ranger Jim Hatfield, to remain cool at such a moment, when the nearest shadow might be a killer raising his gun to shoot.

A sharp challenge rang out in the night—an Ace cowboy calling out:

"Halt! Who're you!" They had to be careful not to shoot a friend in the darkness.

A shotgun boomed, a man screamed, and a burst of carbine fire came from the east side of the bunkhouse.

The battle was on! Slade knew now that

the Ace defenders were waiting for him there in the darkened buildings.

"Take 'em boys!" a stentorian outlaw voice bellowed.

"Come on, vaqueros!" That sounded like Gasca, the big Mexican bandit.

Bloodcurdling whoops rang from the legions of enemies, and as the horses they rode picked up speed, spurred forward by their riders, the ground shook. Volleys came at the ranch, and the bullets spattered on the buildings walls, or shrieked in the air.

Hatfield sighted a mass of horsemen passing the stable he was holding. His shotgun was loaded with buck, and the spreading slugs cut several mustangs and outlaws. The second barrel completed the job, and the party veered and split up, riding off with cursing hoots and profane threats.

Brent and his men, in the house and in other buildings had opened fire, and the first charge slowed, stopped, then broke under a hail of spreading buckshot.

There was a lull. Hatfield peered around the thick upright at the edge of the stable doors.

He could hear men out there, the faint clinking of metal, and a low buzz of talk.

They had dismounted, at Slade's order, and now were creeping in afoot, furious at the initial defeat.

"Slim, let's have one of them coal-oil gadgets," whispered the Ranger to the A C cowboy who was helping him hold the stable.

He had thought they might need quick light, and had prepared some cotton wads, held in pieces of cloth. Dipped in kerosene, of which a supply for use in lamps was kept at the ranch, they made a quick light.

Hatfield touched a match to the dripping mop, and as the fire took hold, he tossed it out into the yard. The oil flared up, and the torchlight showed blinking gunnies, fierce-eyed killers, many of whom Hatfield had seen at the outlaw depot, and others he had fought against in Texas. Leading this bunch was the huge Mexican bandit chief.

Hatfield hastily fired at Gasca. The Mexican screeched and rolled over.

Slim let go, too, his shotgun roaring. The bunch of enemies in the smoky glow of the burning oil jumped up and ran from the point-blank fire of the Ranger and Slim. Brent, at the big ranchhouse, seeing Hatfield using the torch, soon had half a dozen of them burning himself.

Gunshots filled the air, mingled with the cries of angry fighters. Carbines, Colts, shotguns spoke in the night.

SOME of the attackers' initial enthusiasm had worn off, as they saw companions wounded or killed by the defenders' fire. Urged on by the Ranger, the A C fought skillfully. The attempt to sneak in close afoot fizzled out, thanks to the sudden oil lights.

As the kerosene burned away, it left smoking, blackened wads of cotton. The Ranger had thrown one torch upwind, and the drifting smoke was thick near the stable doors. He went back, brought Goldy out and mounted. Ducking low, he rode out through the temporary screen.

Full-tilt, the golden sorrel moved toward the creek, the Ranger low over Goldy's back, gun in hand.

Shouts reached his ears, and a few explosions, but he meant to break through Slade's lines in the dark, before the moon came up. Men loomed before him. His pistol roared, and they scattered before the driving hoofs of the swift gelding.

Sooner or later, Slade would try fire, would try to burn the house and drive out the handful of cowboys defending it. Or he would rig some explosive charge, a bomb to hurl through the windows.

Hatfield knew Slade's kind and the psychology of hired gunmen. They were brave and fierce, glad to kill when they held the advantage. But faced by skillful, determined resistance they would back down.

He burst through the dismounted enemies, and the gelding splashed across the creek, up the other bank, and galloped along the lane. In the night, his Stetson strapped tight under his strong chin, Hatfield picked up speed, heading for the east-west highway.

At the road he swung to the right, west toward the great Texas rangeland which Slade had been raiding. The moon was peeping over the horizon. It was well after midnight and five miles passed under the beating hoofs before he saw riders coming toward him.

"Who's that?" he sang out.

"Deuces wild!" a horseman called.

It was an A C puncher, one of his messengers. He brought the Talliferos and their cowboys and, not far behind, came other ranchers and their fighting men, roused by the Ranger's urgent calls.

But it was another hour before he had a

large enough force to lead back toward Caruthers' ranch.

The moon was well up by now. The Texans, with the Ranger who had his star on silver circle now pinned to his shirt, at their head, hurried toward the A C. It was after three A.M. when they saw a reddish glow in the sky ahead.

"Fire!" growled Ken Tallifero. "Burnin' 'em out, Ranger!"

"Hustle!" ordered Hatfield.

A paleness had come over the world, the first touch of day. It gave just light enough to see by, this pre-dawn.

Mounted outlaw scouts saw the grim Texans coming, and reported back to Slade and his cronies. As the reinforcements for the A C reached the creek ford, they could see that the kitchen wing of the main house was afire.

And they could see masses of Slade's men, turning to meet them.

"Spread out, gents!" ordered the Ranger coolly. "We're goin' to smash 'em."

It was two or three to one, but the Texans were skilled fighting men, and they had suffered much at the hands of the outlaws. Picking up speed, they ignored the long-range bullets whirling past their heads, and charged.

Guns burst into song, heavy volleys as the tough Texans took accurate aim in the gray dawnlight. Hatfield, pistols roaring, whipped in the van, and gunnies began to feel the sting of honest men's lead. For moments they stood, fighting back, but the fury of the Texans appalled them, and the tall rider on the flashing golden gelding threw terror into their hearts.

Bunches broke up. Men leaped into their saddles and, shooting back as they rode, sought to conduct a fighting retreat from the ranch, heading into the hills eastward of the A C. But Hatfield snapped at their heels. Rushing cowmen and their aides gave them no chance.

The outlaws, losing their formation, split up, riding every which way to escape.

Dan Brent and his men issued from the house. They seized buckets and wet blankets, and went to work on the burning wing.

Hatfield, wanting Morton Slade, kept driving on while others pursued the fleeing horse thieves.

Slade was well-mounted, and somehow he had managed to elude the charge. Busy with the main battle, Hatfield lost sight of him.

But he knew Slade's caliber, knew the danger that was in the slippery chief.

"Got to have him!" he muttered, and checked his Colts, giving the sorrel a breathing-spell.

OUT ahead of the fighting Texans, Hatfield picked up sign which showed that most of the killers had swung toward the highway, to escape. Some had died in the battle, and others had surrendered, but many had been able to reach the brush as they raced away.

The Ranger pushed on as the sun rose, warm and bright. He came to the main road at last, and took the route to Whichway.

It was about nine A.M. when he reached the little settlement on the river ford. Lathered horses stood in front of Tate's place, and he knew that some of the outlaws had paused here to drink, perhaps to attempt reorganization.

Hatfield glanced around. Ken Tallifero and half a dozen of his men came galloping after him, and he signaled them to follow.

He rode toward Tate's, aware that he was seen by those inside. A bullet sang past his ear.

But the bulk of Slade's men had had enough of fighting. Some rushed out, threw themselves on their horses, to ride to the ford and cross.

A hail reached the Ranger from across the river. He pelted over on the sorrel, and saw a party of men coming toward Whichway. He recognized the leading figure as a Federal officer he had contacted at Port Blackton. And there was the county sheriff, with a posse.

Morton Slade ran from the saloon, Colt in hand. He saw the posse, saw the panic of his gunnies as they were caught between two fires. Some threw down their guns, hands rising as they surrendered.

Hatfield hurried back as Slade fired at him and jumped back into the saloon. The Ranger galloped up, threw himself off his horse, and came in from the side. Slade tried for him, but Hatfield's Colt blared as he saw the shoulder and arm, and Slade's burning eyes, in the doorway.

Bill Tate, the storekeeper and saloonman, was in there. He had come out of hiding when he had thought Slade had won. Now he began crying for quarter.

"Don't shoot, Ranger! Don't shoot. I quit! Slade's hit. Yuh wounded him that time!"

Hatfield smashed a window with his gun barrel, and leaped inside. Slade, a pistol in his hand, lay on his back, his shoulder against the bar. The stout Tate, crying for mercy, was crouched at the far end of the room.

Slade's hard eyes blazed with his hate. Then he saw the silver star on silver circle.

"Ranger!" he gasped.

"Throw down—drop it, Slade!"

But Slade tried for him again, a final attempt to take Hatfield, the man who had beaten him, along the road of no return.

The Ranger raised his thumb from his Colt hammer. He felt the sure kick of the gun against his hand.

Slade shivered, twitched at the impact. His arm dropped, the slug pinging harmlessly in the wall.

* * * * *

"And that's the story, Cap'n McDowell," said Jim Hatfield. "It'll be a long while before Adam Caruthers can fork a bronc, but Dan Brent's hitchin' up with Philomena and he'll run the A C fine. We found a lot of cash on Slade and the hoss thieves we took, and turned it over to the cowmen to make up some for their losses.

"After Slade died, and we'd picked up the bulk of his gunnies, I rode to Port Blackton with the Federal men and the sheriff. We caught Cap'n Munce and they seized the Sprite for smugglin' and runnin' contraband."

"Bueno!" cried McDowell. "I reckon they savvy now that Texas can take care of herself. The Rangers'll handle anything. Anything, even a case like this that just come in." He rattled the fresh report on his desk.

Hatfield nodded. He was never so happy as when on the danger trail.

"I'll be ready to ride in three shakes, Cap'n."

Later, McDowell again watched his star officer take his leave from Austin headquarters, carrying Ranger law to the utmost reaches of the Lone Star State. It was a satisfaction to his old soul.

Follow the Lone Wolf Ranger on a Perilous Trail of Treasure—and Trouble!

Two leering Aztec idols hold the key to the sinister mystery which enables a powerful outlaw chief to terrorize the range, and it's up to Jim Hatfield to penetrate their secret—while delivering rapid-fire six-gun justice to the miscreants who are wreaking havoc in the Big Thicket country of East Texas! Never before has Jim Hatfield had a tougher fight on his hands—and you'll find him at his battling best in a yarn that pulses with gunsmoke thrills and action from start to finish!

LAND OF HIDDEN LOOT

Next Month's Exciting Complete Jim Hatfield Novel

"Hoist 'em—high!" a voice boomed

JUSTICE—DESERT STYLE

By ROBERT K. RUTH

Windy Evans and Yank Jim Harris face peril in the blazing badlands—and find the burning sands have their own law!

WINDY EVANS snorted in gusty relief as he squinted through the curtain of alkali dust stirred up by the hoofs of the plodding burros. Ahead was Coyote Springs, engulfed now by the shadows of the earthquake-shattered hills. Beyond them the ragged peaks of the Skeleton Range blazed fiercely in the sunset.

"Thought that dadburned sun was tied up in the sky," the short, stocky prospector rumbled fretfully.

Yankee Jim Harris glanced down at his partner. A fleeting grin softened the angular lines of his long, bony face.

"Yuh're the complainingest man. I swear, crossin' the Great Divide yuh'd holler if you

had to flap yore own wings."

"Just the same," Windy grunted, "I'd be knockin' at the Pearly Gates while you stood around tryin' to make up yore mind to fly. I never see such a rooster to work things out. You—hello! Ain't that Hannibal, Jackass Jones' burro, up yonder?"

Scattered masses of black lava dotted the plateau. From behind one of the outcroppings a lean, slate-colored jack had ambled into view. Long ears tilted forward, the burro regarded the little party with round-eyed gravity.

"Yeah, it is that," Yank conceded after a careful scrutiny.

A furrow deepened between his eyes as he watched the jack wheel, trot ahead of their own pack animals, Uncle Tom and Eliza. Every desert prospector knew of the strong bond of affection that existed between Hannibal and his master. "Jackass" Jones boasted far and wide that the burro was gifted with human intelligence. If that were true, his actions now could mean only one thing—the old prospector was in trouble!

The thought made Yank Harris forget his weariness. His long legs began to move faster, covering the ground at a pace his stocky partner found hard to match. He voiced his disapproval loudly.

"Dadburn it, Yank, yuh gone heat loco? Jackass ain't going to run away."

"I judge not." Yank did not slacken his pace. "I have a notion he's in no fix to do anything."

"You ought to stake out that imagination of yores," his partner panted indignantly. "It's gettin' wild as Saturday night in a gold camp."

Yank Harris did not reply. He needed all his wind, for they were breasting the rise that led to the base of the hills. Smelling water, the burros stepped out with renewed energy.

The trail twisted around the base of a ledge, dipped down into a sandy hollow. Rounding the ledge, Yank stopped. Below him, revealed in merciless detail by the reflected glow of the sunset, was a scene that hit the eyes with the brutal force of a blow.

An overhanging rock almost concealed the small pool of Coyote Springs. Within a few feet of it a man lay face down on the sand. The position of the body gave ample evidence of a despairing effort to reach the water before his strength failed.

Yank turned his head at Windy's startled oath, giving his partner a brief, impersonal look. Then his gaze circled the hollow, shifted to a searching scrutiny of the rock strewn ground beyond and on either side. Nothing moved, the silence was broken only by the scuffle of the thirsty burros as they tried to reach the water.

With long strides the tall prospector plunged down the slope to the spring. As he bent over the sprawled figure, the man stirred, struggled to lift himself. Gently Yank helped him to a sitting position.

JACKASS JONES' whiskered face was thinned, gaunt with suffering. He tried desperately to speak, but only husky sounds came from his swollen throat. The effort exhausted his strength, his head fell forward on his chest.

Supporting the old prospector's sagging body with one arm, Yank took the canteen Windy had just filled at the spring. He forced a few drops of water between the swollen lips, but Jones was too far gone to swallow. Yank splashed the lukewarm water over the fevered face and throat of the dying man. He met Windy's questioning gaze, shook his head.

"Thunderation and blue blazes! Seems the Old Woman owed Jackass a better deal." Windy clawed at bristling beard.

Yank Harris agreed silently. Jackass Jones had been a child of the desert, serving her devotedly. But the Old Woman was like that sometimes, cruel, ruthless even with those who loved her.

The old prospector moved, opened his eyes. They were dark with suffering, a desperate appeal in their depths. The muscles of his throat quivered and leaped as he tried to speak. Painfully his lips formed words, broken, hardly distinguishable. The effort put lines of strain in his face.

"Easy, old timer," Yank said quietly. He leaned closer, straining every faculty to understand.

The strained whisper weakened, faded into an inarticulate murmur. A shudder shook Jones' gaunt frame. With it life slipped quietly from him.

Yank eased the limp body to the sand. As he straightened, he noticed for the first time the object clutched in the old prospector's right hand. With difficulty he loosened the grip of the cramped fingers. Windy had dropped into a crouch at his side. Silently the partners looked down at the coffee-col-

ored quartz lying on the palm of Yank's hand.

The float was shot through with seams of yellow metal that gleamed dully in the fading light. Raw gold, possessing the power of an evil demon to fill men with madness. Windy Evans drew in his breath with a sharp hiss.

"Ore like that—is worth going to the rim o' Hades for."

Yank nodded, tight lipped. Windy tore his gaze from the quartz.

"What was Jackass trying to say?"

"Near as I could make out he kept repeating; 'Two men' and 'Fire and water'."

"Out of his head, likely. I been wondering if—" Windy broke off abruptly.

His gaze caught by what he glimpsed through a rent in Jones' ragged shirt, Yank had reached out, twitched the garment open. As he looked his eyes narrowed, muscles bunched in hard lumps along his jaw. He hardly heard his partner's fierce exclamation.

Jackass Jones' chest was crossed by a series of deep, ugly burns. Between them the seared flesh had puffed into raw, flaming ridges. The whole formed a festering wound, burning a dark red against the surrounding skin.

A cold, merciless fury disrupted the orderly course of Yank's thoughts. The torture of the harmless old prospector was the work of devils! Useless, too, since it had been beyond Jackass Jones' power to tell where he had obtained the quartz.

Four years before, the old prospector had been rescued from the heat-cursed trough of Smoky Valley. How many miles he had wandered under a blazing sun without food or water, no one knew. But stuffed in his pockets were several samples of coffee-colored float, laden with the yellow metal.

Jackass recovered in body, but his memory of the past remained a blur. Hopefully he set out to locate the ledge from which the samples had come. Every effort ended in failure. Others took the trail, seeking the lost Jackass Mine. Those who returned came back empty handed. Some did not return at all.

Knowing this, desert men humored Jackass Jones in his eagerness to recount the story of his find. To men unfamiliar with the facts, the sight of the ore was a spark, firing their cupidity to a white heat.

Two men, Jackass had said. When questioning produced no results, the pair had resorted to torture

"The skunks who did this ain't far off." Windy's bared teeth gleamed through his beard. "I seen their tracks t'other side o' the spring. I'm taking the trail—now!"

"Yuh're not going alone," Yank answered softly. "Nothin' I'd like better than to get a sight of them over the barrel of a six-shooter."

"We're giving yuh that chance," a voice boomed at their backs. "Hoist 'em—high!"

The partners raised their arms. Pivoting at a second command, they faced two men who had evidently been concealed in the rocks overhanging the spring. The first, a burly giant, leered at them above the six-gun grasped expertly in a hairy paw. His features were gross, dominated by a nose that overhung the mustache above his loose-lipped mouth. His companion was as lean as a starved timber wolf. Greedy expectation was written on his sharp features as he stared steadily at the partners.

YANK recognized the big man. Ben Slade, a reputed hard case on the dodge, had been in Carson when the partners stopped there early in the spring. His hatchet-faced comrade was a stranger, but a fit companion for Slade if appearances counted for anything. Both were obviously men of the valleys and towns, untried in the heat and hardship of the desert.

Windy's wrath threatened to explode into violent speech at any moment. Realizing the danger of an outburst from his impulsive and hot-headed partner, Yank spoke quietly.

"Easy, Pard. We ain't in a fix to argue."

"Now yuh're talkin'," Slade nodded grimly. "Just stand hitched and nothin' will happen. Search 'em, Mace."

His pale green eyes glittering, Mace moved around behind the captives, searched them expertly. He found no weapons, for the partners' old Colts were wrapped in their bedrolls.

Yank eyed Slade with a calmness that concealed the cold fury in his heart.

"Mebbe you'll tell us what this is all about?"

"Shore I will," Slade grunted. "We met up with the old desert rat yesterday, tried pryin' the secret of his mine out of him. He wouldn't loosen up, even when we prodded his memory. Then we seen you boys comin'. Being the same breed o' cats, we figured he'd talk to you. Seems that he did. Now—" he made a

threatening gesture with the six-gun—"I'm tellin' you to pass the information along."

Windy exploded wrathfully.

"Yuh're a pair o' fools! No livin' man knows where the ledge is located. No white man'd tell skunks like you even if he knowed."

With an oath, Mace jammed his gun into Windy's ribs.

"You talk and talk fast or end up as buzzard meat!" he gritted.

"You seen what the old man got," Slade rumbled. His heavy features were screwed into a threatening scowl. "We can hand you a dose of the same medicine—if yuh get gay."

Yank shot a warning glance at his partner. His own blood was on fire, but he kept a tight grip on himself.

"Looks like yuh got us. Supposin' we help locate the ledge. What then?"

"Now yuh're talkin' sense," Slade nodded. There was a crafty gleam in his eyes. "Take us to the mine and yuh're welcome to stake yore claim after we get ours."

Yank knew that he lied. Slade had no intention of letting either of them live to disclose the murder of the old prospector. On the other hand, it was useless to protest they did not know Jones' secret. There was only one way out. Agree to guide Slade and Mace to the ledge.

Away from the trails, in the middle of the burning hell of sand and rock, the desert would fight for its own. The sands held the bones of better men than the two killers.

"Yuh're not leaving us much choice," Yank said. "And yuh're asking an all-fired lot. Jackass said the ledge was in Piute Canyon—at the southern end. But the piece of float he was packin' isn't much to go on."

"Yuh can find it and yuh will if yuh want to stay healthy," Slade threatened harshly. "Desert rats like you and yore pard can smell gold. If it's more rock yuh're hollerin' about, here's a dozen the old man had with him."

Yank gave a start of surprise. He was thoughtful for a moment or two, then shrugged resignedly.

"Yuh're holdin' the winnin' cards. Piute Canyon's forty odd miles from here, t'other side of the Mineral Sink."

"Which is same as sayin' t'other side o' Gehenna!" Windy muttered.

Slade glared ferociously at each partner in turn.

"If yuh're lyin', won't take long for us to find it out. Now rustle up some grub. We're pullin' out soon as we feed up."

Blurring heat waves rose from the white waste of Mineral Sink, distorting the figures of the little band of travelers. Hannibal plodded ahead, patiently resigned under his pack. The jack had remained near his dead master and was paying for his faithfulness while the straying Tom and Eliza enjoyed their freedom. Yank and Windy followed at the burro's heels, Slade and Mace bringing up the rear.

Dawn had caught them on the eastern rim of the Sink. Yank made no protest when their captors insisted on pushing ahead. He knew the risk of venturing out on the Sink in the blasting heat of mid-day. Madness, death waited on the glittering floor of the dead lake. But greed made the renegades careless when seasoned prospectors would have turned back.

Swirling up from the baking floor, the bitter alkali dust forced its way into nose and throat. The rays of the sun were red hot needles, piercing the flesh and sucking every cell dry of moisture.

A hot haze blurred the Carbon Hills to the east. With the light reflecting blindingly from its mineral-coated surface, Mineral Sink was a cauldron of fire, silent and deadly.

Yank raised bloodshot eyes to the rounded contour of the hills. His thirst was a flaming torment, its roots driven deep into every fibre of his body.

He moved mechanically, fevered fancies rioting in his brain.

WINDY showed the effects of the terrible journey more plainly. Blood had caked on his cracked lips, his eyes were hot with fever. He forged ahead blindly, instinct alone keeping him on his feet.

Yank found a bitter satisfaction in the knowledge that the suffering of the two renegades was greater than their own. They had never felt the unleashed fury of the desert sun. Slade, whose burly body possessed great reservoirs of endurance, was in better shape than Mace. The little killer lagged behind, his pinched features a gray mask of suffering.

Slowly the hills drew closer, while the sun burned down on the rim of the horizon toward the enameled peaks of the Jawbone range. A hot wind stirred on the surface of the Sink, raising long streamers of finely powdered dust. It blew into the faces of the

four travelers, torturing tissues already raw and swollen.

Yank became aware that his partner was no longer at his side. Looking back, he saw Windy crouched on the sand. He was painfully raising himself when Yank reached him, helped him to his feet. Attempting to move forward, Windy weaved unsteadily.

"Easy," Yank urged hoarsely. "Keep a-holt on yoreself."

Windy straightened his weary body with an effort. He took several steps, stumbled and went down heavily. This time he made no effort to get up.

Yank's canteen was nearly empty. He gave his partner the last of the water. It helped to revive the exhausted man. But it was obvious that Windy was in no condition to travel. Turning his head, Yank met Slade's surly frown.

"We've got to stop here for a spell.

"Get up and start movin'!" the renegade croaked. "We ain't wastin' time on the old fool. Let him follow if he can."

A gust of fury fired the blood hammering at Yank's temples. The shimmering expanse of the Sink danced before his eyes, blotting out everything but Slade's brutal features. His voice rose to a hoarse growl as he flung back a challenge.

"I'm not leavin' 'til my pard does. If that don't set with you, shoot and be cursed!"

The defiance swept Slade into a blind, unreasoning rage. His lips peeled back over his teeth as he leveled the six-gun.

"Get on yore legs and start walkin'! No stinkin' desert rat is giving me orders."

Before Yank could answer he felt a tug at his sleeve. Windy's husky whisper carried urgent appeal.

"Never mind me. You—got to keep—goin'. Remember Jackass. Square the account—for both of us!"

Yank weighed his decision, his mind functioning slowly. At last he nodded.

"Reckon yuh're right, Pard. Hang on. Mebbe I'll be back—soon."

Bitter though the knowledge was, he knew that Windy was right. They could not stop here or both would perish uselessly. The advantage lay with the two killers. He could only play his hand out. But he entertained no false hopes. There was one chance in a thousand, no more, that Windy would reach the next waterhole without help.

Hoisting himself wearily to his feet, Yank's gaze swept out across the Sink. Already some two hundred yards distant and heading straight for the hills was the jack, Hannibal. As he watched, the burro broke into a little shuffling trot.

Yank shrugged in response to Slade's profane tirade.

"Why didn't yuh keep an eye on him? This is yore party."

Slade scowled but Yank turned his back on the glowering killer. He knew the jack was heading straight for water. Once his thirst was satisfied, Hannibal would turn back to Coyote Springs.

Slade and Mace, the fools! They did not know they had only to trail the brute to find water. There were a great many other things about the desert they did not know, would not learn until it was too late!

Mineral Sink had clothed itself in the radiance of the sunset when the little party laboriously climbed the last pitch of the gray gravel fan, stopped close to the mouth of the canyon. Bracing himself on wide planted legs, Slade glared at their guide.

"Where's this waterhole you been talkin' about?"

"Right at yore feet," Yank said huskily. He drew the back of his hand across his mouth. "I told yuh we ran a chance it'd be dry."

A muscle twitched at the corner of Slade's mouth, his thick fingers fumbled for the butt of the six-gun.

"I got a good notion you knew this spring was dry. If I thought you were trying to trick me—"

Yank's expression was grim under its coating of alkali dust.

"Nobody but God A'mighty can tell when a desert waterhole'll be dry."

SLADE hesitated, muttering under his breath.

"How far to water?" he croaked.

"Twelve, mebbe fourteen miles up the canyon. How much in yore canteen?"

"Couple mouthfuls," Slade judged, shaking the canteen. "Mace, blast him, swilled the last of his an hour ago."

Yank's gaze shifted, focused for a moment on a moving dot out on the face of the Sink. Hannibal, heading back for Coyote Springs after drinking at the waterhole in the rocks not a quarter mile to the east. The tall prospector's lips tightened, a gleam stirred deep in his eyes. The stage was set, the curtain about to go up on the next act of the drama.

He met Slade's suspicious stare squarely.

"No need to tell yuh we're in a tight spot. Mebbe the three of us can make it. But," as if by accident his gaze shifted briefly to Mace, "it's shore to be touch and go. Sometimes two travel faster than three."

Slade's eyes narrowed as understanding came to him. He nodded ponderously.

"Yeah, yuh're right. Two—that's plenty."

Mace had crowded close to his companion's back. When Slade turned, the little gunman snatched at the canteen. Slade struck without warning. The blow caught Mace high on the head, knocked him flat on his back.

Dazed though he was, the lean killer managed to struggle to his knees. His eyes were wide open, fixed on his partner's face in wild appeal.

"Water!" he mumbled. "I'm burnin' up, got to have water—"

"Water, eh," Slade grunted. "We got none to waste on the likes of you. See how yuh like drinkin' hot lead!

The whiplike crack of the shots flattened out in the torpid air. Smoke from the muzzle of the Colt rose in oily rings that dissipated slowly.

The heavy bullets knocked Mace on his back. His legs drew up convulsively, booted feet digging into the sand. The jerky movements gradually lessened, ceased entirely. A puff of wind moved one loosened shirt sleeve, flapping it in a limp gesture of farewell.

The killer lust burned hotly in Slade's eyes as he measured his remaining companion.

"Now there ain't but two of us. Start prayin' we don't find another dry waterhole. If we do, you get a drink out of the same barrel."

Yank touched dry lips with swollen tongue.

"Best save one for yoreself. We can't keep going much longer without water."

The words cooled Slade's temper, brought an involuntary flicker of fear to his face. He tried to conceal it but his fingers were clumsy as he shoved the Colt back into the holster.

"Tryin' to throw a scare into me, huh? It don't wash, Mister. Start walkin' and remember, I'm keepin' my eyes on you."

Yank obeyed silently. He did not hurry, for he knew he would have need of all his strength before the night was over. His thoughts went back to his partner, alone, helpless on the burning face of the Sink. Slade would pay for that brutality before the adventure was over—with interest!

It would not be the merciful death of a bullet if Yank could help it. There was a better way. The water in the renegade's canteen was pitifully low. To a man without water the sterile canyon was a death trap.

Their progress was slow as they climbed the first steep ascent. The sunset blazed and died while they picked their way among the rubble washed down by the cloudbursts of centuries. Heat pressed down on them, sticky, oppressive. It was a smothering blanket that strung tight nerves to the breaking point.

As the moon lifted above the peaks, it flooded the canyon's floor, painting the shadows of shattered rock and pinnacle in bold, black strokes. The night brought little relief to the thirst tormenting both men. Life had become an endless succession of steps, taken slowly and painfully. With them constantly was a vision of cool, running water.

To Yank Harris it seemed that the blood pounding in his ears was on fire. He had spells of dizziness and the shadows played strange tricks with his bloodshot eyes. The terrible trip across the Sink had taken its toll, his body could not absorb much more punishment without rest.

And still Slade followed, keeping always the same distance between them. The renegade had drained the last of the water from the canteen an hour ago, for all his bull strength he was beginning to break. Only greed, the lust for gold kept him on his feet, forced his unwilling body to endure the long drawn out agony of the journey.

The moon climbed higher into the sky, peering down at the two travelers between walls that were gradually drawing closer together. Yank plodded on, fighting the weariness of his body and the maddening thirst that was robbing him of his grip on sanity.

Yank stopped, turned slowly as Slade missed his footing and fell. The renegade pulled himself clumsily to his feet, cursing in a hoarse undertone. In a sudden frenzy, he shook his fist at the glittering sky.

"Curse you. Curse this whole, all-fired country—!"

His voice broke, trailed off. Heat-oppressed silence, settled down, mocking his defiance. Yank started forward again, Slade followed.

They skirted a rock slide, spewn down from the crumbling wall above. Before them, bright with the light of the moon, was a smooth cliff, marked with great splotches of volcanic coloring. At its base, moonlight reflected brilliantly from its surface, was an

oval pool of water!

The sight sent an overwhelming frenzy of desire flooding through Yank's body. Driven blindly by his raging thirst, he stumbled over the rock strewn ground. His eyes saw nothing about the shimmering surface of the pool. Reason, struggling against the intense craving for water, slowed him as he neared his objective. In that moment he heard the heavy pound of Slade's boot heels at his back.

The renegade went by in a rush, shouldering Yank aside as he made for the waterhole. The impact knocked the prospector off balance. He stumbled, fell heavily as a loose stone turned under his foot.

HIS head whirling from the fall, the prospector struggled to a sitting position. It was several moments before he was able to steady himself enough to look for his companion. When he did, he saw Slade sprawled beside the pool, his face almost buried in the water.

Slade's hat had fallen off and floated on the surface a foot or so from his head. The burly killer drank in great gulps, sucking up the water with loud, animal like noises.

It was an effort to rise but when he stood on his feet, Yank was again master of himself. His plan had succeeded, all but one detail. Slade still had the gun. If he moved fast enough, there might yet be time.

He took two steps and stopped. Slade reared up on his haunches, hands pawing the air. He spat out a great mouthful of water, choked on an oath. One hairy paw was fumbling for the six-gun as he turned, facing his companion. He raised the weapon, his eyes burning catlike through the wet hair straggling down on his forehead.

"Yuh tricked me, blast yore lyin' heart! I might a-knowed when you didn't drink, something was wrong."

"Trouble is yuh're a blamed fool!" Yank answered. His voice was a harsh croak, but in the dead hush the words had a startling clarity. "You were so all-fired cute, yuh thought you could beat the desert. She's got yuh, Slade, got yuh hard and fast. Usin' that gun won't help yuh now."

The husky rasp of Slade's breathing was plainly audible. He bent at the waist, clutching his midriff as a cramp tied his muscles in a knot.

"My insides are all afire," he panted. "That water—poison! It's burnin' me up! You knowed it, and let me drink. I ain't leavin' you behind—not while I can trigger a gun."

Facing the menace of the Colt, Yank sucked in air through his tortured throat.

"Yuh're not dying, not this easy. Nothing wrong with that water, except it's salt. I led you here on purpose, knowing fire and wild horses couldn't stop you from drinkin'.

"Now yuh're caught, no way out but to find fresh water—fast! If yuh don't, it won't be pleasant dyin'. No more than it was for Jackass Jones or my pard. Shootin' won't fix anything, not for you. Water's what yuh've got to have. Start lookin', Slade. Mebbe yuh'll find it and mebbe yuh'll find only the desert, waiting, waiting—"

Slade lurched to his feet. Fear and hatred seethed in his brain, twisting his features into an expression hardly human. He was still shaken by violent muscular reaction to the quantity of salt water he had gulped. But the gun barrel held steady enough so that Yank knew Slade might miss once, but one of the bullets would find its mark.

"Smart, ain't yuh," the killer muttered fiercely. "Led me into a trap, figured on leaving me there. It didn't work. No desert rat can live to laugh at Ben Slade."

Yank dropped as the shot came. His fingers, groping desperately, encountered a jagged stone the size of his fist. He hurled it with every ounce of strength he possessed.

The stone caught Slade in the mouth, smashed his lips into a bloody pulp. He rocked back, slipped and dropped to one knee. The gun spun from his loosened grip to drop with a clatter on the rock a few feet before him.

Yank was in motion before the Colt had stopped spinning. He lunged forward, outstretched fingers reaching for the weapon. Stunned though he was, Slade retained enough wit to realize his danger. He fell flat, clawing at the six-gun. Thick fingers closed on the butt. As he started to lift the weapon, Yank's hand closed over his.

There was a short struggle, but the prospector had the advantage of leverage. Slowly he forced Slade's hand back. The gun muzzle swung up. There was a blinding flash, the crash of the report. His face stung by the burning powder, Yank pulled back.

An instant or two he was blind, then his gaze focused on Slade's burly form. Slowly the quivering body sank down. A final shudder ran through the muscles and he lay quiet, his face pressed against the rock.

A pebble rattled down from the cliff, the

sound loud in the silence. From the depths of the canyon a puff of hot wind blew into the tall prospector's face. Yank's gaze lifted from Slade's sprawled form to the stars, glittering brightly in the desert sky. Stronger than the fevered cry of his body for water was a deep, abiding peace.

Windy was avenged and Jackass Jones. The desert had decided the struggle as surely as if she had pulled the trigger of the Colt. In the end, the Old Woman had been too strong for Slade, as she had for countless others like him.

DAWN brushed a gray streak along the eastern horizon, widened and pushed it higher into the sky. The shadows fled from the desert, retreating swiftly before the brightening day.

Gaunt, reeling with weariness, Yank approached the waterhole at the canyon's mouth. He stopped abruptly as a sound reached his ears. A man stepped out from behind one of the scattered rocks. Yank's face was blank with surprise as he stared at the bearded apparition. Unless his mind was conjuring up a vision, he was looking at Windy Evans

The greeting of the partners was unemotional enough.

"Might a-knowed a tough old rooster like you would be hard to kill," Yank said.

"Seems that way." Windy's swollen lips tried to smile. "It was the burro saved my hide. Walked right up to where I was layin' and stopped. Danged if I don't believe the good Lord told him I was in trouble and needin' help. When we pulled in here, I found the little skunk. So I waited."

Yank related the events leading to Slade's death.

"A jackass, now, he'd have made a try to find fresh water after sampling Salt Spring, and found it a hundred yards up canyon. But Slade's nerve was gone. Like old Deacon Jacks used to say he was tried and found wantin'."

"He had no business buckin' the desert," Windy observed. "Was it account of Salt Spring you led them skunks up Tewman Canyon 'stead o' Piute?"

Yank shook his head.

"Changed my mind when I got it through my thick head Jackass had been trying to say Tewman and not 'two-men'. The fire and water part was right, only he meant 'Fire Water'."

"Thunderation and blue blazes!" Windy's jaw sagged. "You ain't meaning—Jackass located the ledge?"

"He did and was tryin' to tell us so. If yuh recollect, a lot of old timers still call the spring Fire Water, account of the red lava walls."

Windy plunged one hand into bristling beard.

"Then the Lost Jackass is found! Look here, I never guessed what Jackass meant. How'd yuh know?"

"You recall Jackass only brought back three, four pieces of ore the first time he stumbled on the ledge? Well, soon as Slade said the old man had been packing a dozen like the one we found on him, I knew he'd stumbled on the outcropping again. The rest was easy."

"And them two coyotes never guessed they handed you the secret," Windy said huskily. "The Old Woman had a hand in this, Pard. She didn't aim for them two tinhorns to have her gold."

"Looks that way," Yank agreed. "There are folks claim Satan looks out for his own. If he was doin' so in this case, he lost out to the Old Woman. She was actin' as judge and jury and handed out justice—desert style!"

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Bullets whined overhead, terrifying the horses

HANGNOOSE IN FLAT ROCK

By BEN FRANK

A man like Johnny Bodell can swear off fighting if he's minded to, but it's sure a plumb difficult vow to keep!

THREE men rode past the Flat Rock Hotel. The big one in the lead wore a floppy black hat pulled low over his narrowed eyes. He twisted his dark, round face into a sneer and said, his voice harsh and loud:

"There's that stove peddler I was tellin' yuh about."

The two other men, one fat and ugly, the other thin and sickly, grinned and turned cold eyes on the man in front of the hotel.

It was Saturday afternoon in the little cow-town of Flat Rock, and things hummed there on Saturdays. Nesters and ranchers flocked into town, buying and selling and drinking. And sometimes fighting.

Johnny Bodell, the stove peddler, pretended to ignore the three riders. He took a deep drag on his quirly, thinking that he had better open up for business, see what he could do in this new game of his. He was plenty worried about making good.

As the men rode on, Johnny Bodell tossed his cigarette butt into the hot dust and

headed toward the unpainted rickety store building he had rented a few days before. His Sunday clothes looked a little snug for him across the shoulders, and he walked like a man used to wearing high-heeled boots and feeling six-guns against his hips.

He wasn't a handsome man, with his craggy brown face that needed more meat on it to hide the bones, but he had nice gray eyes and a grin with a trace of sadness in it that people seemed to like. And there was a strong determination in him to succeed at this new game, for he had a desperate need for money.

That was why he had taken the agency in Flat Rock for the Bright Flame oil stove. He believed the Bright Flame would be a sure seller.

A sign on the building said, "Free Coffee and Doughnuts." That was to draw customers on his opening day.

Bodell headed for it, fighting the little knot of worry that kept growing in him. It seemed that he had two strikes against him here before he'd even got started. One was that a rival stove company had planted the rumor that the Bright Flame had a tendency to overheat and explode. The second was that a lot of people believed the rumor.

The three riders, he saw, now were slouched in front of the Red Ace Saloon. The big dark man was "Topper" Trine, owner of the Box T, and Johnny Bodell had made the mistake of cutting in on Trine at the Wednesday night dance.

Not that Bodell considered it a mistake. Dancing with Ann Rogers couldn't be a mistake. And looking at Trine now, Bodell had that same uneasy feeling that he had known at the dance. Some place he had seen that man Trine before.

AS BODELL passed, Trine flipped his cigarette butt through the air. It missed Johnny Bodell's brown nose by a scant inch.

"Sellin' a lot of explodin' stoves, Dude?" Topper drawled.

Bodell felt the blood pound up in his ears, and anger shook him.

"Hold it, son!" he told himself fiercely. "Remember yuh ain't losin' your temper again!"

He hurried on to the old store building, remembering back to the last time he had lost his temper. The memory made him feel sick. He had been deputy sheriff then, but no one in Flat Rock would know about that.

A few curious people were gathered around the building as Bodell unlocked the door and went in. Some of the people followed, grinning and looking a little embarrassed, knowing that the free food interested them more than the stoves.

Eleven oil ranges stood against the walls of the long bare room. A twelfth, on which steamed two huge pots of coffee, stood near the front window. On a counter near the stove sat a bushel basket heaped with doughnuts. Beside the basket, Bodell had stacked up a little pile of pamphlets which explained how a new principle of combustion made the Bright Flame far superior to the old type of oil stove.

"Step right up, folks," he invited. "It's all free."

An oldster with a handlebar mustache cleared his throat.

"Wouldn't want to be caught in here if that contraption would take a notion to explode," he muttered.

Johnny Bodell laughed good-naturedly. "Explode? Don't worry. It's been goin' all mornin' and ain't exploded yet."

A few people came up to the counter. Bodell, passing out doughnuts and coffee, began his spiel. As he talked, he saw that he was wasting a lot of breath. People were suspicious of him and afraid of his stoves. He had a lost, hopeless feeling. He had tied up every cent he owned in these stoves, and he *had* to sell them.

"I'll tell yuh what, folks," he said. "I'm goin' to make yuh a proposition. To the first person who'll take one of these stoves and give it a fair trial with the understandin' that if it is everything I say it is, he'll buy it, and I'll let him have it at half-price."

A deep silence filled the room. Bodell's eyes moved over the faces before him. Mostly they were unfriendly. But these people needed his stoves and would buy them if they were only sure the stoves were safe.

He noticed that Topper Trine and his two men stood in the back of the room, grinning. He saw old Granny Jarvis, the oldest person in Flat Rock, gumming a doughnut and cupping a wrinkled hand behind her ear. And then he saw Ann Rogers.

Ann stood beside her father, a tall, slim girl with deep blue eyes and a glint of copper in her brown hair. She whispered something to old Cam Rogers, and he nodded his shaggy white head. Ann and her father ran the Circle R at the foot of Indian Hills.

The girl stepped forward, smiling a little timidly.

"We'll take you up on that offer, Mr. Bodell," she said.

He felt his heart thump hard against his ribs.

"Thank yuh, miss," he said. "I'll deliver it this afternoon."

"If one of them things did explode—" someone began.

"Listen, folks!" Bodell said earnestly. "They don't explode. To prove, I'm goin' to let this stove burn night and day. Any time anybody cares to come and look through the window, he'll see it burnin'—and there'll be no explosion!"

"Ain't the way I hear it," old Granny Jarvis shrilled.

"These stoves are absolutely safe!" Johnny Bodell protested.

"Don't let him fool yuh, Granny," Topper Trine said, and grinned. "Any minute that contraption is likely to go boom!"

The old lady looked about nervously. Suddenly there was a loud explosion. Everybody jumped, and the old lady let out a startled cry. One of Trine's men had exploded a paper bag. Snickers went around the room.

Bodell fought down his rising anger. "Remember," he told himself, "yuh ain't fightin' any more! Yuh ain't goin' to let yourself hit another man!"

Ann Rogers was looking at him curiously, and his face suddenly felt hot. He knew she was wondering why he didn't do something about that exploded paper bag.

He let his hand grope around in the empty basket.

"Well, folks," he said, "looks like that's all for today. Come back next week and there'll be more. And by then, Miss Rogers'll be ready to tell yuh what a wonderful stove the Bright Flame is. Thanks for comin'."

MINUTES later, he was alone in the ramshackle building with his discouragement. The people were still suspicious, and he had let big Topper Trine make him look like a yellow fool. The only bright spot was Ann Rogers' offering to take one of the stoves on trial. He would always be grateful to her for that.

He locked up and went over to the livery barn to hire a team and a buckboard to use in delivering the stove. Sheriff Ed Haley stood by the barn door, chewing a straw and looking worriedly along the street.

"How's the stove business, son?" he asked absently.

Bodell grinned wryly. "Slow," he answered.

The sheriff rubbed a freckled hand over his sweaty red face. "Must be like the sheriffin' business," he growled. "Another holdup last night on Saw-tooth Trail. The stage was carryin' a box of gold from the Lady Luck Mine, and old Dan Marks, the driver, got a slug through his hip."

Ike Ranson, the stable man, hobbled into the doorway.

"I still say them owlhooters is from across the ridge," he declared.

Sheriff Haley shook his gray head. "I ain't got the least idea where they're from," he said, and walked away.

Ike looked after him and sent a stream of tobacco juice into the hot street.

"Old Ed's as worried as a bronc with a burr under his tail," he remarked. "The stage's been held up twice now in three months."

Bodell made arrangements for the buckboard and drove it back to his place of business.

Topper Trine stood in the shade of the building. He slouched forward a little and stood on wide-spread feet with his hands deep in his pocket, his hat low over his narrowed eyes. He carried a bone-handled six-gun, and there was a fighter's hunch to his big shoulders.

"A certain feller I could name," he said flatly, "would be smart if he didn't get too friendly with his customers."

Bodell felt his fists ball, and his old quick temper leaped up like a flame. A month ago, he would have planted a fist in the dark, sneering face. Now he turned and went into the building without a word.

When he carried the oil stove out to the buckboard, Trine was gone. And so were the three Box T horses that had stood in front of the saloon. Bodell locked up and headed toward Indian Hills and the Circle R.

The road was rough, the going slow, so it was nearing sundown when two riders came out of the brush along a dry creek and rode toward him. They were "Shorty" Stork and "Whack" Welsh, Topper Trine's men.

Whack rode a little in the lead, his long bony legs swinging loosely. Shorty, a grin on his ugly fat face, carried a square wooden box under one arm. Both men carried six-guns.

"Hi'ya, Dude," Whack said tonelessly.

"Looks like business is good," Shorty remarked grinning.

The men turned their horses and rode beside Johnny Bodell's team.

"Business is rotten," Bodell said, and all the time he kept a tight hand on the lines, knowing that he was in for some kind of trouble.

"Looks like yuh're makin' a delivery," Shorty observed.

Whack's pale eyes had turned to slits. "Mebbe we should ought to help him along, Shorty," he said.

"Yeah," Shorty agreed, "I reckon so."

He pulled the box from under his fat arm, jerked off the lid and threw something between Bodell's horses. It was a rattlesnake, very much alive. The rattles buzzed, and the horses snorted and leaped forward. Whack's and Shorty's guns roared, and bullets whined overhead, piling up panic in the already terrified horses.

From then on, Bodell had his hands full and then some. He had to drive the runaways with one hand and steady the stove with the other. And somehow he had to stay in the bouncing wagon. That in itself was a full-sized job.

Dust fogged up about him, burning into his nose, blinding him. His hands were slick with sweat, and he twisted the lines about his fingers and felt the leather cut into his flesh. Skillfully he fought the team's panic, and at last began to get control.

At the top of a hill, he managed to bring the quivering horses to a stop. He saw then that Trine's men had disappeared. The stove had suffered little damage, but the can of kerosene had upset and spilled over the bottom of the buckboard.

He sat down on the spring seat and wiped the blood from his hands. A helpless rage burned through him. His resolve never to fight again was badly shaken. . . .

BY THE time Johnny Bodell had the stove set up and going in the Bar R kitchen, it was sundown. Old Cam Rogers and Ann both insisted that he stay for supper.

Ann could cook, and Bodell, who had been living for the past few days on the uncertain fare of the Flat Rock Hotel, ate until he felt ashamed. Later, when he was leaving, he asked Ann if he might take her to the next Wednesday night dance in Flat Rock.

She hesitated, and then asked, "Johnny Bodell, what are you afraid of?"

"Afraid of?" He pretended surprise. "What do yuh mean?"

"You're not fooling anyone, Johnny," she said. "You've got a reason for not standing up for yourself. You didn't this afternoon."

"I know," he said bitterly. "When Trine's man popped that paper bag."

She nodded. "I've no business to ask you," she said. "Don't tell me if you don't want to."

He suddenly wanted to. This girl, he knew instinctively, was more to him than a customer for one of his stoves.

"A few weeks ago," he began, feeling the familiar little wave of sickness hit him, "I had a fight. Oh, it wasn't the first one I'd had. In fact, back home I was pretty well-known for hot temper and quick fists. And the way I could handle a gun. But . . . Oh, this don't mean anything to yuh."

"I'm listening, Johnny," she said quietly.

"All right," he plunged on. "I lost my temper. I was deputy sheriff back home, and a kid said something about my office going to my head. He really didn't mean anything by it. He was a good kid—but I hit him. It did somethin' to his spine. He couldn't get up. His legs wouldn't work—haven't worked since. I said then that I'd never fight again—never hit anybody, no matter what."

"I understand, Johnny," Ann said gently. "But sometimes it's right for a man to fight."

"Not the way I feel about it," he said.

He turned away from her and stumbled to the buckboard.

"Johnny," Ann called, "I'll go to the dance with you. I'll be in town and will stay overnight with Aunt Sally."

"Thanks, Ann," he called back, and drove away.

Even if Ann had promised to go with him, he felt terribly depressed. He could still hear the smack of his fist on Tony Fisk's chin, could see the look of shocked wonder on the kid's face as he lay on the ground, trying to move his paralyzed legs.

Now Tony was in a hospital under the care of a specialist who said that some day the kid would walk again. That was why Johnny Bodell had to have money. He was paying Tony's hospital bill. The agency in Flat Rock had looked like a sure thing until the rival company had planted the rumor that the Bright Flame was dangerous. That rumor was the thing Bodell had to kill, and kill mighty fast, if he expected to help Tony.

Sunday, Monday and Tuesday, twenty-

four hours a day, Johnny Bodell kept the stove burning in the store window. People came along and stood looking at it, but no one ventured inside the building.

Monday and Tuesday afternoons, the salesman made a house-to-house canvas. The only person who invited him in was old Granny Jarvis. She insisted that he sit down in her little cabin and have a cup of tea.

"I like your looks, young feller," she squeaked. "I don't mind tellin' you that people are watchin' that stove in your window. They're gettin' mighty interested. You just keep on like you have and you'll come out all right, young feller."

Even if he didn't sell Granny a stove, he went back to the Flat Rock Hotel with a whistle on his lips.

As he entered, he saw Sheriff Haley in the lobby, twisting at his ten-gallon hat. A slow grin broke the frown on his red face.

"People are shore talkin' about yore stove, son," he said. "The bettin' odds on it explodin', I hear, is droppin' fast."

Bodell grinned back at the lawman. He had liked this man from the first time he had seen him. And now he had a feeling that everything would eventually work out all right just as Granny Jarvis had said.

The front door slammed open, and a panting cowboy rushed into the lobby.

"Sheriff," he wheezed, "Miles Brash down on Snake Creek has been murdered! Reckon it was robbery. Everybody knows that ol' Miles didn't believe in banks."

The sheriff swore heavily and followed the cowboy outside.

The hotel manager looked worried. "I don't like it," he said. "All this robbin' and killin' has got me scared."

Johnny Bodell went on up to his room. The old washed-out, let-down feeling was with him again. . . .

THE next morning, he was refilling the tin tank on the oil stove when a long shadow crossed the rough pine floor in front of him. He glanced up and felt his muscles tighten. Topper Trine stood in the doorway, grinning sardonically.

"Hi'ya, Dude," he said.

Bodell finished his work and set the oil can carefully on the floor. He waited tensely for Trine's next move.

"I see yuh got some stoves left," the man said.

Bodell nodded, his eyes sliding over the rancher's hat-shadowed dark face, past his wide shoulders to the bone-handled six-gun. Again he had a feeling that he should know this man.

"I come to buy a stove," Trine said.

Johnny stared at him blankly. Trine laughed harshly.

"Yuh look like yuh seen a ghost," he said. "Come to life, Dude. I'm a cash customer."

He glanced at the price tag on a stove and counted out the money from a thick roll of bills.

"Yuh won't have to deliver this one," he went on sneeringly. "In fact, if I ever caught yuh on my spread, I'd likely take a shot at yuh." He turned and bellowed, "Shorty, Whack!"

The two men came in, grinning. They picked up the stove and walked out. Trine followed, leaving Johnny Bodell staring dumbly after him.

That same afternoon, three things happened which Bodell realized were important when he remembered them later. First, a strong sweeping wind blew from the south, hot and dusty and drying. Second, Sheriff Ed Haley rode out to Snake Creek to have another look around the murdered man's cabin. Third, Johnny Bodell got a letter from the hospital.

Tony Fisk was better, the letter said. He could move his right leg. That letter gave the stove salesman the lift he'd been needing. He even stopped worrying about why Topper Trine had taken such a sudden notion to buy a Bright Flame stove.

In the evening, Bodell took Ann to the dance. People, were becoming friendly, he noticed. A number of them said they had been watching the stove through the window and they guessed if it ever was going to explode, it would have done it before now.

As they danced, Johnny Bodell told Ann all about his hopes. As soon as he got the stove business under way, he said, and the hospital bill paid, he intended to add a line of hardware. Eventually he hoped to find a larger building in Flat Rock and to have an honest-to-goodness store. He had another hope, too, and it had to do with Ann, but he didn't tell her about that.

Right in the middle of "Arkansas Traveler," three men burst into the room. They stood with their backs to the wall, their red-rimmed eyes sweeping the dancers. The music trailed off, and people stood staring in silence.

Bodell and Ann edged forward. The men were a frightening sight. Their clothes were scorched and torn, their hands and faces blackened and blistered. They were Topper Trine and his two men, the fat, ugly Shorty and the too-thin Whack.

"There he is!" Trine's voice rasped in the thick silence. "There's the skunk who's responsible for my cookshack burnin'! Him and his explodin' stoves! If the wind hadn't been in the south, every buildin' on my place would've burned!"

Eyes turned on Bodell, and a low murmur went up.

"Look!" he said desperately. "If that stove exploded, it wasn't the stove's fault. Yuh've seen a stove goin' night and day in my window, and yuh know them stoves don't explode!"

"The one yuh sold me exploded," Trine cut in. "That's all I know. And I figgered I owed it to others to warn 'em. That's why I come. Not to argue or raise a ruckus or fight. Just to warn folks."

With that, he turned and walked out. Shorty and Whack trailed after him. They left a lot of black silence in the room.

The music began with a sudden harshness, and people started their fun again. All except Johnny Bodell and Ann. The fun for them was over. In a little while they left, and he walked with her to her Aunt Sally's place at the far end of town.

Bodell walked back to the store building and stood looking through the window at the clean white flame in the burning oil stove. He was puzzled, still trying to remember where he had seen Topper Trine's face before. He got no place fast with his thinking. Shaking his head hopelessly, he went on to the hotel and to bed.

A CRY of fire aroused him from a troubled sleep. He glanced out the window. It looked as if the whole north end of Flat Rock was aflame and, remembering the lashing south wind, Johnny Bodell knew panic. There would be no checking that fire with the meager fire-fighting equipment in the little cowtown. He leaped into his clothes, rushed out into the smoke-filled air and raced toward the roaring flames.

"How'd it get started?" he asked the first person he met.

The man glared at him and pointing a shaking finger toward Bodell's store building. Only it wasn't a store building now. It was a twisting flaming furnace.

"It started it there," the man rasped. "Yore cussed stove exploded!"

Sick at heart, Johnny helped the townspeople fight the fire. In the distance, he thought once that he saw Ann lugging a bucket of water, but he wasn't sure.

House after house caught from the sparks carried on the high wind. The sight was both grand and appalling, and the fire-fighters could do nothing except keep the fire confined to a narrow north and south path.

Toward morning, the wind died down and the fire began to run out of fuel. Only then did the people stop to rest.

Exhausted, Bodell dropped down on a stone well curb. The hideous reddish light from a flaming hay barn lit up the scene. He saw the ruin about him, realized the ruin of his own hopes. He had lost everything—and so had many of these people.

He covered his eyes with his blistered hands. Could it be that he and his stoves had brought disaster? It could be.

An angry muttering made him look up. People were closing in on him, and leading and urging them on was Topper Trine and his two men.

"Run him out of town!" Whack Welsh yelled.

Blackened hands shoved an old donkey into the narrowing circle.

"We'll ride him out on this!" Trine howled, and a shout of approval went up from the mob.

Bodell knew what was coming. They would tie him to the old donkey and drive the animal through the streets and out to the trail. Maybe he would get out alive, and maybe not. He didn't much care right then.

A woman shoved into the circle. Her clothes were torn, her face fire-blackened, her hair stringing in two gray braids down her back. She lifted thin arms high and screamed:

"He's a murderer! Old Granny Jarvis was burned to death in her cabin!"

"The woman's right!" Topper Trine said in the sudden sickening silence. "He same as killed the old lady with his explodin' stove!"

"Get a rope!" a man yelled, and someone tossed a lariat into the circle.

Bodell remembered then that Sheriff Ed Haley was out of town. There was no one to hold the mob in check. He stood up, staring at the hate-filled faces. Once he had seen a man lynched. The horror of that hang-

ing was still strong in him. Fear struck him then.

His eyes whipped about for a way out. There wasn't any. Shorty Stork picked up the lariat, uncoiled it and tossed the free end over a cottonwood limb. The red light on his face made him look like a fat, ugly, grinning idiot.

A roar went up from the mob.

"Hang the killer!"

Women screamed, and people fought to get out of the way of a madly plunging horse. The horse and rider plowed into the circle and raced up to Johnny Bodell. The rider leaped to the ground, her long brown hair looking like bright copper in the eerie light from the burning hay barn. She was Ann Rogers.

The girl shoved a long-barreled gun into Bodell's fist.

"Get on that horse and get out of here, Johnny!" she whispered. "It's your only chance! These people won't hurt me, and when they've had time to think, they'll be ashamed of what they're doing now."

He leaped into the saddle and rode through the path that Ann had made. Guns roared, but the slugs whined overhead. The men were shooting high because of the crowd.

JOHNNY BODELL rode at a tearing gallop through the ruined street toward the south, feeling the hot, smoky air against his raw face. Bullets followed him, but the men would have to get their horses and, once out of town, and headed for the Saw-Tooth Trail to the west, he had a chance. He knew he would be followed, though. Topper Trine would see to that. But until morning, they would have trouble following his trail.

Five miles from Flat Rock, he turned north, leaving the trail, and headed toward the hill country. Even if it meant his capture by the angry mob, he knew there was one thing he had to see. He had to see Topper Trine's burned cookshack.

The sun was low in the east when he rode up to the Box T buildings. The cookshack had stood back of the low-roofed unpainted ranchhouse. The place looked deserted, for Trine and his men were in town, and by now would be leading the mob on Johnny Bodell's trail.

He kicked among the ashes and uncovered the remains of the oil stove. Dragging the twisted metal out of the ruins, he examined it carefully, and his heart began to pound. A blind man could tell that the stove had not exploded. The tank was crushed inward, not bursted outward.

His eyes whipped up at a sound from the house. The back door had opened, and Whack Welsh stood in it, his lips pulled thin against his teeth. Whack certainly had made a quick trip back from town. The man cursed, and his bony hand dropped toward his gun. The gun came up, but a split second too late. Bodell had snaked the long-barreled six from under his belt and had fired. Whack doubled up and rolled down the back steps to the ground.

A gun flashed just inside the doorway, and a bullet tugged at Bodell's sleeve. He sent a blast at the flame, and the ugly Shorty Stork pitched forward on his face and lay still.

So Shorty and Whack hadn't followed him out of Flat Rock, Bodell thought. Perhaps no one had followed him!

On a hunch, he raced to the front of the house where he had left his horse. He got there just as Topper Trine dived through the front door and headed across the porch.

Trine didn't bother with the porch steps. He made a flying leap for Bodell's horse and would have made it if Bodell hadn't wrapped his arms around the man's legs.

They went down together and rolled over, kicking up the choking white dust. Trine tried to get hold of his gun, but Bodell got it first and threw it into a clumb of weeds. Both men got to their feet, panting. Trine had lost his hat, and his stringy black hair hung over his eyes.

"So yuh set yore own cookshack on fire," Bodell clipped, "and then set my store buildin' on fire!"

Trine didn't answer. He shook the hair out of his eyes and lunged. His fist caught Bodell in the mouth and sent him staggering back against the porch. He tasted salt and felt the hot blood running over his chin and down his neck.

Ann, he remembered, had said that sometimes it was right for a man to fight. This was one of these times. This was a fight for his life against a murderer, and he knew it.

He sidestepped Trine's next swing and let the big man have one on the chin. Johnny Bodell's right packed a terrific wallop. It set Trine back on his heels and it gave Bodell a chance to plant a left over the man's heart and to clear his right for action.

He took two fast ones from Trine in the

face before he unlimbered his right for a second blow. That one did it. Trine hit the ground with a hollow-sounding plop. He didn't get up.

Bodell staggered to the porch and sat down. He had hit Tony Fisk like that with his right. The memory still made him feel sick.

And then he looked at Trine's dark still face. For the first time, he saw the man without his hat or without his hair hanging over his forehead. He saw the little triangular scar at the hairline, and he knew then why Trine's face had seemed familiar.

The rattle of hoofs brought Bodell to his feet. Sheriff Haley and a group of riders spilled around the cedar windbreak behind the low barn. Riding close to the sheriff was Ann! The riders drew up in front of the ranchhouse.

Haley slid to the ground, his face red and tired-looking.

"Got back just as yuh pulled out of town last night, Bodell," he said. "Time I got things straightened out, it was too late to try to foller yuh. So I took Ann's advice and come out here. She figgered I ought to have a look at Trine's cookshack before I passed judgment."

THE sheriff's eyes moved to Trine's still face. "Okay, Bodell," he said. "Start talkin'."

Johnny Bodell talked. He held nothing back. He told about Tony Fisk, who had lost the use of his legs, and he showed the burned stove to the sheriff.

"And," he finished up, "put a crop of black whiskers on Topper Trine's face, and I reckon you'd have Blacky Barnes who's wanted up in my home town for a killin' and a bank holdup. Mebbe if yuh'd look around, yuh'd find the gold that was taken from the stage a few nights ago. And mebbe yuh'd find it was Blacky and his men who robbed and killed Miles Brash. Blacky is that kind of an owlhooter, in spite of him playin' the honest rancher hereabouts."

Three men went stamping into the house.

"I reckon," Bodell went on, "Blacky knew me right off and was afraid I might recognize him even without his whiskers, and spoil his set-up here. That's why he went to all the trouble to run me out of town. Why he helped keep alive the rumor that the Bright Flame stoves was dangerous."

Johnny Bodell was tired. But he took a deep breath and stumbled on:

"Also, there's a sizable reward for Blacky. I know it ain't enough to pay for the damage the fire did last night, and it won't bring old Granny Jarvis back, but mebbe it'll help some of the people who need it most."

"Son," Haley said gruffly, "that reward money's yores. It'll help yuh get a new stock of stoves."

"Don't worry about me," Bodell said. "The stoves were insured. The money goes to the people of the town."

A man came pounding out of the house.

"We found it, Sheriff!" he yelled. "The iron box from the Lady Luck Mine!"

Ann Rogers stepped up to Johnny Bodell and stood straight and close to him.

"Now," she said in a clear voice, "would be a good time for you men to put in orders for Johnny's stoves."

Suddenly everyone laughed and began to crowd around Ann and Johnny Bodell.

"Two stoves for me, Johnny," Ed Haley said. "One for the jail kitchen, and one for my home."

Bodell grinned, and suddenly noticed that he had his arm around Ann's waist and that she didn't seem to mind. He knew then that as soon as he had her alone, he was going to tell her how she fitted in with his future plans in Flat Rock. And he had a mighty good idea what her answer would be.

When mysteriously-slain Indians and a series of terror raids by masked marauders mark a scourge that threatens California, Rusty Dade's gun medicine is the only cure in GUNS TO THE SUNSET, a smashing novel by Dean Owen featured in the October issue of WEST—only 15c everywhere!

Two men sat in their saddles, grinning over leveled six-shooters

Long Sam's Pistol Preachment

By LEE BOND

Long Sam Littlejohn has a tough job keeping ahead of a manhunting lawman while pursuing a passel of kidnapers!

LONG SAM LITTLEJOHN'S parched lips cracked until he tasted the salt of his own blood when he grinned. But he did not mind the pain, for ahead was the Rio Grande, and Littlejohn's deep-set, smoke-colored eyes were as bright as the sun-touched water as he gazed at the vast, wild country beyond the muddy stream.

Outlawed, with a sizable chunk of reward money posted for his dead-or-alive capture, Long Sam Littlejohn often crossed the Rio to the safety of Old Mexico when badge men and bounty-hungry citizens in Texas got to giving him too much trouble. And he was having considerable trouble now, for Joe Fry, deputy U. S. Marshal, out of Austin, was hot

on his trail.

Littlejohn sighed wearily, and glanced back. A dust plume funneled up into the still, hot air above the tall, thorn-armored thickets through which he followed a winding but well-used trail. The dust plume was less than a half-mile back, and Littlejohn chuckled grimly when he realized that Joe Fry was running the heart out of a good horse trying to overtake him before he could cross the river.

Littlejohn absently patted the sweaty hip of Sleeper, his mount. Sleeper was a knobby-kneed, splay-footed roan with a ratty tail and a scrawny neck that supported an ill-shaped head. He looked like crow bait, and had a disposition even worse than his looks. But Texas badge-toters who had tried to capture Long Sam Littlejohn swore that that ugly old roan was the fastest, toughest hunk of horse-flesh ever foaled.

The gaunt outlaw was within a hundred yards of the river bank now. He pulled the two black-butted six-shooters that rode his thighs in holsters that were as jetty black as his pants, boots, shirt and flat-crowned Stetson, and put the guns in one of the pair of saddle pockets behind the cantle.

He meant to quit his horse when they hit swimming water, hang onto the saddle-horn and let Sleeper tow him across. But those six-shooters would never stay put in their holsters when he started swimming.

Littlejohn glanced back at the dust plume Joe Fry's horse was kicking up, wincing when a grin made his cracked lips pain sharply. He was facing the river again when he felt Sleeper's steady lope falter. A croaking oath escaped the outlaw's bleeding lips, and suddenly he was hauling back on pliant reins.

HE WAS at the notch where the trail went down the steep bank to the yellow Rio, all right. But the reason for Sleeper's sudden slowing was that two men sat their saddles there, grinning coldly over levelled six-shooters.

"Nice of yuh to put them six-pistols of yores away, Littlejohn!" one of them said with a sneer.

He was a lanky man, with beady black eyes that blinked constantly, and a thin, sallow face. A big metal star with "SHERIFF" lettered in black across its face sagged one pocket of his blue flannel shirt. And Sheriff Mitch Purdy, Long Sam Littlejohn was remembering uneasily, had the reputation of shooting first and collecting afterward where such things as bounty-plastered outlaws were concerned.

There were whispers along the Rio Grande that Mitch Purdy was a renegade lawman who used his badge to loosen sizable chunks of hush-money from stock thieves and smugglers who operated in his bailiwick.

Long Sam reined his blowing, sweat-marked horse to a stop and faced the two grinning men. What had him stumped was finding big, handsome Todd Finney with the blackleg sheriff.

Todd Finney's Circle F Ranch was one of the largest in this Texas brush country, and the burly, black-haired ranchman was rated a dangerous man to cross. He was wealthy, arrogant, and cynical, despite the fact that he was still young. He had been a reckless, ruckus-raising but likable sort of fellow until a lanky, red-headed Irishman named Pat McCray had married Juanita Madero eight years back and taken charge of the vast Madero grant across the line.

"Howdy, Finney," Long Sam greeted drily. "Howdy Purdy. You gents lookin' for somebody special, or is this an accidental piece of bad luck I'm havin'?"

"We were on high ground across the river a while ago, Littlejohn," Todd Finney said. "We watched you and Joe Fry play tag over here in the thickets. That little devil is gettin' close to yuh, ain't he?"

"Too close," Littlejohn admitted, watching Finney narrowly.

The big ranchman's bright, black eyes were burning strangely, and there was something forced in the grin on his handsome face. Long Sam felt a prickle of uneasiness, but tried not to show it.

"I don't like Joe Fry no better than you do, Littlejohn," Mitch Purdy said.

His voice was thin, and he had a way of speaking without moving his thin red lips much.

"So yuh don't like Fry, eh?" Littlejohn asked.

"I hate the derby-wearin', cigar-chewin' little buzzard!" Purdy said coldly. "Him and his store clothes and button shoes! He looks like a drummer, not a peace officer."

"But he's one of the toughest manhunters in the Southwest," Littlejohn sighed. "And with you gents here to bay me, I reckon Joe'll get to put the bracelets on me, at last."

"The devil he will!" Mitch Purdy said harshly.

"So you aim to waltz me in to Portales, and jail me as yore own catch, eh?" The gaunt outlaw shrugged.

"Who said anything about jailin' yuh?" Todd Finney asked.

Littlejohn looked at him sharply, saw the tension in the rugged, handsome face. Finney's eyes were too bright, and some dark emotion stirred him deeply. Again Littlejohn felt that tingle of uneasiness, but could not explain it.

"If you gents don't want me, then let me down this bank," he said quietly. "I'm behind on my swimmin', and Mexico shore looks good to me."

He fully expected Mitch Purdy to laugh in his face. To his surprise, Purdy glanced off at the dust cloud Joe Fry's mount was kicking up, and frowned.

"That Fry is gettin' danged close, Todd," he warned the big ranchman.

"I know he is." Finney nodded. His tension was increasing. "Littlejohn," he said harshly, "yuh're in a split stick. Mitch and me can shoot yuh, and Joe Fry would thank us. Or we can get out of yore way and let yuh swim that river."

"What's on yore mind, Finney?" Littlejohn asked, trying not to feel hopeful.

"Pat McCray is on my mind, cuss his red-headed, green-eyed soul!" Finney's laugh made Littlejohn shudder. "I've got that McCray where I want him!" Finney went on. "I was engaged to Juanita Madero, but McCray came along, swept her off her feet, and married her. But I've got 'em both now, got 'em eatin' their hearts out, dyin' by inches."

He sleeved clammy sweat from his face and laughed again, the sound harsh and bubbling.

"What kind of a shenanigan have you two pulled on Pat McCray?" Littlejohn asked bluntly.

"We've got Pat McCray's six-year-old daughter, Julia!" Todd Finney said harshly. "McCray and that high-headed wife of his are dyin' a thousand deaths an hour. And before I'm through—"

"Look out, Todd!" Mitch Purdy shrilled.

LONG SAM LITTLEJOHN'S face had gone white, and his smoky eyes seemed to recede in their sockets. Through barely parted lips he began humming a doleful range song. He had not moved, yet the twitchy-eyed sheriff was backing away, cocked six-shooter rigidly on target.

"Watch that long-shanked heller, Todd!" the sheriff yelped. "He never hums that funeral music unless he's killin' mad!"

"Scruples, eh, Littlejohn?" Todd Finney sneered. "Yuh don't like my sweatin' Pat McCray and his pretty wife, do yuh?"

Littlejohn quit humming, but his long hands were shaking as he crossed them on the saddle-horn.

"Stealin' a little child is the lowest, cowardliest crime a human bein' could commit!" he said hoarsely. "You and Mitch Purdy are the scum of the earth, Finney, and if I had a gun in my fist I'd kill yuh both right now!"

"But yuh haven't got a gun in yore fist," Todd Finney grunted. "Mitch and me have the guns. Joe Fry is gettin' too close for comfort, so there's no time to haggle. Yuh'll either throw in with Mitch and me, or we'll shoot yuh and take Fry's thanks for our trouble."

"So yuh want to pull me into yore slimy deal, do yuh?" Littlejohn asked through gritted teeth.

Rage was shaking him, threatening to upset his usually cold, level-thinking mind. But through that rage reason bored stubbornly, warning Littlejohn to swallow his fury, bide his time.

"We met one of Pat McCray's *vaqueros* a half-hour ago," Finney said. "I sent McCray word that he's to dig up twenty thousand dollars in cash money by midnight tonight if he wants that brat of his back. I told him I'd send a man for the money, but to keep his mouth shut to the rurales and the Texas Rangers if he wants to see the kid alive."

"Pat and Juanita will do whatever yuh've said for 'em to do." Littlejohn nodded. "They can raise twenty thousand without much trouble. And yuh want me to go get that money, do yuh?"

"I want yuh to fetch it back here to this ford." Finney grinned coldly. "Mitch will meet you. Him and Kirk Simpson, the only other man in on this deal, will split the cussed *dinero* between 'em. I don't want or need it. I'm gettin' mine out of watchin' Pat McCray and the woman he stole from me curl up and die."

"And the little girl?" Long Sam asked. "Do I take her back home?"

A manicial light sprang into Todd Finney's eyes, and there was an unholy gloating in his

grin. But before he could answer Mitch Purdy snapped erect in the saddle, cursing uneasily. Then Littlejohn and Finney heard the faint, rolling drum-beat of a horse running.

"Joe Fry!" Finney said gruffly. "Yuh've got no more time for yore preachments, Littlejohn. Which'll it be, noose-dodger? Do yuh swim the river and fetch that money, or do Mitch and me commence lacin' lead into yuh?"

"I'll swim the river," Long Sam said tonelessly. "If Pat McCray has raised the money, I'll be back with it at dawn. But how do yuh know I ain't just sayin' I'll do yore dirty chore so's yuh'll let me get out of Joe Fry's reach?"

"You'll come back, Littlejohn." Todd Finney grinned savagely. "You and Pat McCray have been friends for years. Yuh fetch that money, or McCray will never lay them green eyes of his on his brat again. Now hit the river, while Mitch and me lope down the trail and stall Joe Fry. . . ."

THE only dry garment Long Sam Littlejohn possessed was the big, flat-crowned black Stetson he pulled off his tow-thatched head and laid down beside him. His other clothing dripped water, and his boots were full to the top. But he did not mind that as he flattened out on the ground, smoky eyes hard and alert.

He was on Mexican soil now, atop a brush-covered hill high above the Rio Grande. This was the highest ground in the neighborhood, and Littlejohn could see for miles across the brush country beyond the river. He was watching Mitch Purdy and Todd Finney, who sat their horses side by side in the trail, blocking Joe Fry's progress.

Littlejohn could see Fry's stocky, derby-hatted figure sway in the saddle as he gestured toward the river. He kept the big dun he rode prancing, and Littlejohn knew that the cold-eyed, hard-lipped little deputy marshal was fuming to be on his way.

After ten minutes or so, Fry turned his horse and rode back into the thickets at a walk. He rode with shoulders slumped and head hanging, the picture of a man defeated. And suddenly that sent a sharp alertness through the bitter anger and nagging uneasiness that deviled Long Sam Littlejohn. Joe Fry was not the sort of hombre who hung his head and started feeling sorry for himself in defeat.

Littlejohn's attention sharpened, his eyes following Fry attentively. And suddenly the watching outlaw grunted, for the moment Joe Fry had made the first winding turn in the thicket-flanked trail, he snapped erect in the saddle, turned his head to look back over one shoulder.

Fry kept his horse at a walk, but continued to watch his back trail until he had made a half dozen turns in the crooked trail. Then he swung his mount into a natural opening that led back into the thorny jungles. Fry rode as far as the winding lane went, then dismounted, took his mount's reins and vanished from view beneath the tall brush.

The outlaw's eyes whipped back to Todd Finney and Mitch Purdy, who still sat their horses in the trail.

"So you two black-hearted devils overplayed yore hands!" he muttered grimly. "Fry knows yuh fed him a pack of lies about seein' or not seein' me, whichever way yuh told it. And the little cuss will stick to yore sign like a bur in a pony's mane until he sees whether I meet 'em or not."

He broke off, watching Mitch Purdy and Todd Finney ride along the trail into the thickets. They spurred their horses into a lope, and Long Sam's eyes were mocking as he watched the dust lift high above the brush in their wake. Fry, he knew, would be watching that dust plume, too, and could sit on his hunkers and let Todd Finney and Mitch Purdy get a long start before he lit out after them.

The trail forked a half-mile ahead of the dust Finney and Mitch Purdy were raising, and Long Sam made himself comfortable, wanting to know which fork of the trail the two hellions took. If they turned left, he knew they would, be traveling up-river to Portales, the county seat town where Mitch Purdy had his jail and office. If they turned right at the forks, then they would be heading out toward the low foot-hills that lay beyond the thickets, where Todd Finney's huge Circle F ranchhouse was located.

"Finney and that squinch-eyed sheriff are too smart to hold little Julia McCray anywheres in or near Portales," the outlaw mused. "They wouldn't take her to Finney's ranch headquarters, either. But that big Circle F range of his has line camps scattered all over it, so . . . What the devil!"

Littlejohn's muttering ended on a sharp note of surprise. Todd Finney and Mitch Purdy had quit the trail. Littlejohn had not

seen them rein off the beaten track, because the dust their horses kicked up obscured the riders from his view. But he suddenly glimpsed them riding a narrow trail that pulled off to the right. He watched, his excitement mounting as he discovered that what Todd Finney and Mitch Purdy were following was a man-made trail through the brush.

"I'll be dog-goned!" he exclaimed, and sat bolt upright.

HIS sharp eyes had followed the winding path which ax and machete had made through the tornillo, mesquite and pear. The trail ended at a clearing, and Littlejohn was high enough in his observation post to see the house, a circular brush corral, and the small barn inside the corral.

His eyes whipped back to the trail, watching Todd Finney and Mitch Purdy. They followed the trail boldly down to the clearing, and Littlejohn watched them dismount at the corral, strip gear from their horses, and let the mounts into the enclosure. A man came out of the house and stood watching them, and presently Finney and Mitch Purdy walked up to him and followed him as he turned and entered the rear door.

Excitement gripped Long Sam Littlejohn as he let his eyes follow the sweeping curve of the river from that house up to the ford directly below him. It was about a mile, he judged, if a man traveled along the river from the ford down to that clearing where the house was located.

But the river bank over there was a tangle of tall thickets, and Littlejohn knew his brush country better than even to consider trying to bore through those towering green walls. Nor did he dare swim the Rio again and follow the trail around to the hidden house yonder on the river bank, for Joe Fry was out there in those thickets, alert and on the prowl.

But a man who hid his house as well as that house down-river was hidden would, Long Sam Littlejohn guessed shrewdly, have more than one trail to and from the place. And what would be more logical, Littlejohn asked himself, than for the builder of that hidden house to have chosen a spot where the Rio Grande could be crossed?

The gaunt outlaw crawfished backward until he was below the brow of the hill, then stood up and pulled his Stetson on with a determined tug. He worked back down the slope to where Sleeper was cropping grass despite the bit in his mouth, mounted to the big roan's saddle, and rode down the Rio Grande on Mexican soil.

It took him over an hour to work his way downriver through the thickets until he was opposite the house where Todd Finney and the sheriff had gone. Littlejohn's face and hands were scratched, and gouging thorns had left fiery welts on his knees and thighs. But the gaunt outlaw did not mind those minor discomforts when he saw the narrow but well-used trail that pitched down a steep bank to the muddy water of the Rio.

Across the river, he could see the outline of the clearing, although the house, brush corral and the little barn were far enough back so that they did not show. But Littlejohn's sharp eyes could see the crooked dark scar that was the trail leading up from the water's edge to the clearing.

He grinned mirthlessly, eased Sleeper off the trail he had found and into a little clearing where there was grass for the horse to graze on. The outlaw dismounted, took the bit out of the big roan's mouth, but left on the saddle. Squatted on his heels, Long Sam Littlejohn waited there in moody thought until the sun was down, and dusk was building shadows among the thickets.

When a hot, black night that was alive with the ear-splitting song of insects descended, Long Sam Littlejohn eased his big roan down the steep trail to the water's edge. The river was wide here, and the outlaw had watched enough driftwood wash past on the current as he waited for darkness to know that it was swift, too. He heard and felt the grind of Sleeper's iron shoes on stone, and was relieved to know that he would not have to worry about quicksand.

But he was nervous over having to cross such a wide, swift strip of the Rio at night, and was prepared to roll out of the saddle the moment his horse struck swimming water.

To Littlejohn's complete surprise, the rushing current never touched the saddle skirts!

"I'll be teetotally danged!" the outlaw mumbled. "This is shore a Border-hopper's dream come true. A freak rock strata angles across the Rio here, spreadin' the stream out, but makin' a safe, shallow crossin'. And if that house yonder don't belong to some Border-hoppin' buscadero I'll eat the durned place!"

He eased Sleeper onto the steep trail, walking the big roan slowly to cut down

noise. When he struck the outer edge of the clearing and saw the thin yellow strips of light showing around curtained windows at the house, he reined the roan to the left, following the river bank for several rods before halting.

LITTLEJOHN dismounted, pulled his spurs off and hung them on the saddle-horn, then moved off into the night, his black raimment blending into the shadows. He circled the house at a distance of twenty yards, studying the sturdy structure carefully. He ghosted in closer and had circled half-way around the house again when he heard the voice of a child, crying out thinly in fear or pain.

Faint, yellowish light touched a window in the wall a few feet ahead of Littlejohn. He went toward the window swiftly, knowing that the door to a darkened room had been opened, letting in light from some other part of the house where lamps were burning. He stopped near the window, making no attempt to peer through.

"Mr. Simpson, this chain hurts my ankle," a little girl's voice was saying wearily. "Please take it off."

"Yeah, and have yuh runnin' off again, like yuh done the other day!" a guttural voice answered. "You lay down and get some sleep, or I'll fetch me a switch in here and warm yuh up good."

"Little Julia McCray!" Long Sam Littlejohn whispered, and suddenly his nerves were tight and beginning to buck a little.

He heard booted feet inside the house, then Todd Finney's deep voice sounded inside the room where the little girl was evidently chained.

"Well, well!" Finney mouthed mockingly. "If it ain't Princess Julia, King Patrick McCray's pride and joy. So the little princess don't like to be chained to the bed post, hey?"

"Uncle Todd, why don't you like me any more?" the little girl asked uneasily. "Mother and Daddy said I must call you Uncle Todd, and you were always nice to me when you came to our ranch to visit. But you came that day when Mother and Daddy were gone, put me on your horse and brought me up here and told Mr. Simpson to keep me. Did I do something bad, Uncle Todd? Is that why you and Mr. Simpson hit me with switches?"

Long Sam Littlejohn did not hear what else the little girl was saying. He was sliding away from the window, rage-blinded as he whirled and stumbled toward the front corner of the house. He was too angry to plan, too fighting mad to care what happened when he went after those child-stealing blackguards there in the house. He meant to simply barge in with his guns in his fists, and vowed coldly that he would shoot the first one of the cowardly devils who made a move that looked even the very slightest bit hostile.

But Long Sam did not go barging into the house. He whipped around the front corner of the building—and a gun muzzle punched him in the stomach. Before him loomed a short, stocky figure that had an oddly round, dome-shaped head.

"Let out a peep that'll warn yore pards in there, Sammy Boy, and I'll kill yuh where yuh stand!" Joe Fry, deputy U. S. marshal, said in a cold, deadly voice.

Long Sam Littlejohn felt limp and shaken, as if the rage in him had burned the life from every nerve in his whole body. But he had that rage under control now, and was forcing his mind to work coherently.

He was plodding slowly past the brush corral there behind Kirk Simpson's house, Joe Fry's six-shooter prodding him along from behind. The gaunt outlaw's guns were gone, and he could hear the jingle of a pair of handcuffs Fry had out, ready to snap onto his wrists when the time came.

"No funny business, Long Boy!" Fry snapped, when Littlejohn stumbled. "Yuh're the huckleberry I want, and I'm willin' to get yuh away from here without tanglin' with yore pards, if I can. But crowd yore luck and I'll let yuh have it!"

"Joe, this is once yuh've *got* to listen to me!" the outlaw cut in desperately. "Back there in that house, them three snaky hellions have got a little girl chained to a bedpost. She's the daughter—"

"I've been pussy-footin' around outside that house since dusk!" Fry cut in gruffly. "I know Simpson has that brat chained to a bed. But the way a man handles his young 'uns is no concern of mine. Hustle along, before I knock yuh cold and drag yuh to my hoss."

"Yuh stubborn fool, listen to me!" Littlejohn choked. "That youngster back there is Julia McCray, red-headed Pat McCray's daughter."

"Hmmph!" Fry snorted. "What would a Border-hoppin' cow-thief and smuggler like

Kirk Simpson be doin' with Pat McCray's kid?"

"Todd Finney stole the child from McCray's ranch!" Littlejohn said harshly.

BEFORE Fry could interrupt, he told of his meeting with Todd Finney and Mitch Purdy at the river crossing that afternoon. Littlejohn talked swiftly and with conviction, yet he knew before he had finished speaking that he was wasting his breath.

"Shucks, noose-bait, yuh don't think I'd swaller a story like that, do yuh?" Fry laughed coldly. "Todd Finney and Mitch Purdy blocked me away from that river this afternoon while you got across. I knew that when they swore they'd just come across, but hadn't seen yuh. I'll take care of that pair when the time comes. But right now I've got you, and yuh'll be too dead to know when we get to town if yuh make one little try at escapin'."

"Joe, I swear to heaven that's little Julia McCray chained to that bed back yonder!" Littlejohn said desperately. "Give me back my guns, help me get that baby away from there, and I give yuh my word that I'll hand my guns back to yuh and let yuh handcuff me the minute little Julia is safe."

"Yuh're breakin' my heart, Sam!" Fry said wryly. "So cut out yore cussed lies and shuffle along a little faster. Yuh're hang-noose bound, and all the tall tales yuh could tell . . . Stop!"

The last word had come in a sharp whisper, just as Fry marched his prisoner around to the rear of Kirk Simpson's tall brush corral. A big moon had pushed up out of the east, and by the first reddish glow of its light, Littlejohn saw two horses standing a few yards away.

"I left my bronc alone back here," Fry was whispering again. "If there's somebody else snoopin' around this brush—"

Littlejohn glanced around, and was about to remark that only one of the horses had riding gear on it. But as he glanced around he saw that Fry had stepped a half-pace to one side, and was peering at the two horses intently. Fry's gun still pressed against Long Sam's side, and the hammer was back, fully cocked.

Without any awareness of planning it, Long Sam Littlejohn's left hand dived down with the speed of a red-tailed hawk after quail. Joe Fry rasped an oath and yanked the trigger of the gun. But there was no explosion. There was only another snarled curse from the stocky officer, and a sharp, hot pain coursing up Littlejohn's left arm from the web of skin between his thumb and forefinger, where the firing pin on Joe Fry's falling gun hammer had bitten down savagely.

Fry bucked backward, lashed at Littlejohn's face with the handcuffs, kicked at the tall outlaw.

The handcuffs hit Littlejohn hard across the face, brought blood rushing from a cut cheek and from the thin nostrils of his long nose. He twisted sideward and took Fry's kick on the hip, grunting in pain. Then the outlaw's big, knobby fist lashed out, pumping like a piston as he struck short, savage blows into Fry's face and head.

The deputy's knees buckled finally, and Long Sam wrenched the Colt from the lawman's fist as he staggered away. The outlaw lifted the spiked hammer, freed his flesh from the firing pin, and slammed Joe Fry savagely over the head with the gun as the deputy rushed in. There was a brittle, crackling noise when the barrel and cylinder of the Colt caved in the crown of Fry's derby. Then Fry was on the ground, senseless and unmoving.

Long Sam Littlejohn pounced on Fry, found his own black-butted six-shooters in the deputy's waistband, and returned them to their own holsters. Then Littlejohn lifted the stocky, powerfully muscled lawman up, grunting and sweating as he carried him to the waiting horse.

The range horse that had poked up to sniff Fry's mount skittered away, snorting. Littlejohn put Fry astride the saddle, slapped him across the face with open hand until he began mumbling curses, then handcuffed Fry's right wrist to the saddle-horn.

"What the devil yuh doin', yuh—" Fry loosed a string of fighting names as he sat swaying there in the saddle.

But Long Sam Littlejohn ignored him, moving up to the head of Fry's mount. He stripped the bridle off the horse, headed it out toward the thickets, and cut it sharply across the rump with the bridle's pliant reins. Joe Fry's voice was a snarl of pain and surprise as the horse crashed through a wall of thorny brush.

Littlejohn threw the bridle down, snorted a spray of blood from his flaring nostrils, and turned back toward Kirk Simpson's house. He stalked down the moonlit clearing and up to Simpson's back door as if he owned the

place, his smoky eyes glittering slits in the shadow of his down-slanted hatbrim. He pushed the back door open and stepped inside, glancing about a small kitchen that was lighted by moonlight coming through two windows.

ACROSS the kitchen was a doorway that let into a dining room, and beyond that was a room where voices droned and lamplight lay warm and bright. Littlejohn went down the short hall on soundless feet, a spectre in the shadows, black-clad as an angel from the pit, humming, prophetically enough, a minor-key dirge that seemed to swell in volume until it boomed back from every corner of the house through which he moved.

Then he was in the lighted doorway, something satanic in the grinning, bloody face from which two eyes that were as smoky and cold as old ice watched the three thunderstruck men who sat at a table that was littered with cards, money, overflowing ash trays, two lamps, some whisky glasses and a jug.

Mitch Purdy's sallow face had a green tinge, his tongue stuck out as if he were being garroted, and his eyes seemed actually to spin in their sockets. Big Todd Finney looked pale, but put a scowl on his dark brow, and licked at his lips as if hesitant to say whatever he thought.

Kirk Simpson had reared up out of his chair, breath wheezing hoarsely as he strangled on a mouthful of whisky he had been trying to swallow when Littlejohn stepped into the doorway. Simpson was barrel-chested, broad across the seat, and had long, hair-matted arms that hung down from sloping shoulders. He was dark-skinned, badly pock-marked, and had the pale, soulless eyes of a man who would kill without compunction.

"What yuh want here, Littlejohn?" Kirk Simpson's voice was a rumbling growl of anger.

"You," Littlejohn said tonelessly. "I want you and Mitch Purdy and Todd Finney. I want yuh dead, here on this floor, while yore black souls drift down to the hottest corner of perdition, yuh child-stealin', buzzard-blooded whelps."

"Preachments again, eh?" Todd Finney sneered.

"Preachments?" Long Sam intoned. "Mebbe yes, mebbe no. But most, mebbe I'd let these guns I pack finish whatever preachments I had to make to you three low-lived renegades."

"But don't forget that we're three to yore one," Finney snapped. "Button yore lip, or I'll have Mitch put bracelets on yuh and haul yuh off to jail. Anything yuh said about us no court would believe."

Kirk Simpson, who was already on his feet, started the ball rolling. Littlejohn saw the pale, killer eyes dilate a second before Simpson's bristly black head ducked forward, his big left hand cupping, reaching around to slap at the nearest lamp on the table. At the same time, Simpson's right hand was shucking a blued Colt from leather.

He missed the lamp and did not have his gun quite out of leather when Long Sam Littlejohn's left-hand Colt threw a slug that hit Kirk Simpson in the mouth. The pock-marked face went lax, and the chill eyes rolled back until they showed only the muddy whites when death, and the force of the bullet that had killed him, sent Kirk Simpson over backward.

A bullet whistled past Long Sam's right ear, causing him to duck, spin around sharply to catch Mitch Purdy scuttling toward a heavy couch, smoking gun slanting back for another shot. Littlejohn's right-hand gun bucked twice in rapid succession, and Mitch Purdy, renegade lawman, was one less worry for the Texas Rangers and other honest peace officers.

But Long Sam Littlejohn was not paying any more attention to the shuddering hulk of dying flesh that had been Mitch Purdy. He was grunting from the pain of a bullet that had hit slashingly across his right ribs, knocking him down to the grimy pine floor. The outlaw had suddenly twisted around just as he fell, getting his left-hand six-shooters into line.

Big Todd Finney was standing over behind the littered table, a reckless grin on his handsome face, holding a smoking six-shooter out at the full leg length of his right arm. He was cocking the gun without haste, something gloating and ugly in his too-bright eyes.

"So yuh wanted a fight, eh?" he laughed harshly. "All right, I'll give yuh plenty of it!"

"Speakin' of plenty of somethin'—" Long Sam said drily, and flame-lanced thunder belched from the muzzle of his left-hand six-shooter.

TODD FINNEY rocked back on his heels, dropped his own six-shooter without firing it, and looked down at the widening wet stain that was just above the buckle of his belt. The wet stain had a black hole squarely in the center of it, and there was an amazed look in Todd Finney's eyes when he lifted his gaze to Long Sam Littlejohn, who was now on his feet.

"Yuh're the only two-gun man I ever saw who could actually use both weapons," Finney said slowly.

"I can use both hands the same," the gaunt outlaw admitted. "I can rope, write, throw rocks, shave or shoot just as well with one hand as I can the other."

"I'll remember that," Todd Finney promised. "Next time we meet, I'll remember to watch for—"

But they would not be meeting again, Long Sam thought gravely. Todd Finney's voice had ended on a hiccoughing sort of sound, and there was the blank and lifeless look of empty-house windows in his eyes as he pitched over to thump heavily against the flooring.

Littlejohn sighed, reloaded his guns, then opened his shirt and examined the gash across his ribs. It was deep, and bleeding freely, but the outlaw reckoned that his undershirt, which had been river-washed that day, would be bandage enough for the time being.

He buttoned his shirt, walked over to the table, and gathered up the stacks of gold, silver and greenbacks that lay there. He grinned wryly, telling himself that a bounty-plastered outlaw who couldn't stay in one place long enough to make an honest living had to get along any way he could.

Littlejohn was reaching out for one of the lamps on the table when he heard the rush of feet behind him. He whirled around, six-shooters palmed. A startled look came into his eyes, then he was leaping down the room, beginning to grin at what looked like a bundle of rags diving at the six-shooter Mitch Purdy's dead hand still touched.

Littlejohn kicked the six-shooter aside before the hurtling rag-pile could pounce on it. Then he holstered his guns, and stood grinning down into Joe Fry's bulldog face that was almost unrecognizable from scratches that crisscrossed the bloodied skin in every direction.

Fry's chubby hands were raw with scratches, too, and the remnants of what had been a neat brown suit that afternoon clung to his rage-shaken figure like so many pieces of frayed-out rope. There was killing rage in his hard gray eyes, and Littlejohn got back out of reach when the scarecrow figure stood upright.

"What the devil did yuh do, Joe—go wildcat huntin' with a buggy whip?" he asked.

Tears of rage shone in Joe Fry's eyes as he cursed Long Sam Littlejohn long and furiously.

"Yuh've killed three men in here tonight, cuss yuh!" he finished. "I seen yuh gather up money off that table yonder and stick it in yore pocket. Mitch Purdy was a sheriff. Even if he was a black-leg, and a disgrace to decent lawmen, he was still a sheriff. And I'll have every badge man in Texas on yore trail after tonight, Littlejohn. Yuh killed these men to get their money, and I'll see that yuh swing for it!"

"Shore, I know," the outlaw shrugged wearily. "I let a hoss scrape a little hide and a few clothes off yuh in the thickets, and yore cocky pride is hurt. Yuh'll claim I murdered three men here tonight because I wanted their money, and another trumped-up charge will go down against me!"

"Trumped-up charges!" Fry roared in fury, and suddenly leaped at the outlaw, blocky fists swinging savagely.

Littlejohn tasted blood when knuckles ground his lips against his teeth, and saw hot lights dance before his eyes when another blow caught him on the ear. But he pedaled back, jockeyed the infuriated Fry into position with two short, light left jabs, then looped an uppercut to the officer's chin that stretched him out on the floor, senseless.

Littlejohn looked somberly down at the deputy marshal for a moment, then strode to the table and picked up one of the burning lamps. He walked out into the hallway, moving quietly along, studying the three closed doorways. When he heard a faint rustling sound behind one portal, he moved to it.

"Julia?" he called.

JULIA answered, her voice low and afraid. Littlejohn remembered his bleeding lips, the caked blood on his face from the cut Joe Fry's handcuffs had made. He blew out the lamp, put it down against the wall, and went into the room.

"Don't be afraid any more, youngster," he

said gently. "This is the man yore red-headed daddy taught yuh to call Uncle Sam. Remember me, Julia?"

"Oh, Mr. Littlejohn!" the child cried. "Uncle Sam, you'll take me home to Mother and Daddy, won't you?"

"Yuh bet I will, honey," the outlaw reassured her.

There was enough light coming through the window to show him the bed, and the slender little figure that scrambled toward him as he approached. He found the light chain that was looped about the youngster's left ankle, and located the wire that had been too heavy for the little girl's fingers to undo.

The child was crying a little, her arms clinging to him desperately as he freed her. Then the gaunt outlaw had the youngster cradled in his arms, moving out of the room and into the hallway. A few moments later he was outside, going down across the clearing in long strides to where Sleeper stood nibbling grass.

He mounted to the saddle with little Julia McCray in his arms, and was out of the clearing and just below the brow of the steep river bank when he heard a door slam back at Kirk Simpson's hideout. Joe Fry, Long Sam knew, had come awake and was on the prowl.

Littlejohn urged Sleeper down the steep trail and into the swift water. The gaunt outlaw heaved a sigh of relief when the roan's big hoofs touched Mexican soil.

Littlejohn's smashed lips and the cut on his cheek ached dully, and pain that felt like raw flame seared the bullet cut across his ribs. But he set his teeth against the pain that deviled him, cradled the sleepy child in his arms as comfortably as possible, and put Sleeper at a long lope along the smuggler's trail that went south.

It would take a good two hours of that steady loping to reach Pat McCray's huge *hacienda,* and Littlejohn knew that the jolting would keep that bullet-ripped side of his giving him agony every inch of the way. But he knew that his own suffering was minor to what Pat McCray and his wife were going through, and kept Sleeper loping on south along the smuggler's trail that was lighted by the big Mexican moon.

●

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(Continued from page 6)

more or less authentic background for story-writers for generations.

The latest "lost mine" yarn I've heard comes from an Arkansas family, recently arrived in California. While crossing the desert, in the vicinity of Needles, papa blew a tire. While he was fixing it, his three-year-old boy wandered up a wash and came back with a handful of "pretty sand." It glittered. So Pop took it in to an assayer. Turned it to be almost unbelievably rich gold placer sand—$3000 to the ton!

At last accounts, Pop was still trying to find the spot where his young one picked it up.

Another writer-in asks me which is saltiest—Salton Sea or the Great Salt Lake. That's a hard question. I'm told that the water of Great Salt Lake, Utah, is 27% salt. Salton Sea doesn't contain that much—somewhere around 15%.

The Three Buffalo Mystery

What would you do if you rode over the top of a hill that you'd known practically all your life, in a well-populated ranch district, and suddenly came upon three grazing buffalo?

I reckon we'd all do what that Utah cowpuncher did when he met with just such an experience. He tore into town to report his discovery and folks just laughed and refused to believe him—until he took 'em out and produced the buffalo.

It happened near the small ranch town of Buffalo Bench. Despite the name, buffalo hadn't been seen there in the memory of the oldest inhabitant.

They finally figured out the mystery. Those three wild and shaggy bison had wandered up from the buffalo refuge in northern Arizona. Stockmen of the district got together and agreed not to molest the critters that had reverted to their old migratory instinct of travelling north and south with the seasons.

Dona Ana County

Here's a fact not commonly known, gals and galluses. Did you know that way-back-when Arizona was Dona Ana County of New Mexico Territory? It's a fact. In 1863, it became Arizona Territory and in the early 1900's became a State. Mebbe you history sharps can supply the date. I was there in Arizona when she was admitted to Statehood but I disremember the exact year.

Ever hear of "Apache tears?" It's a term that puzzles most everybody except rock professors. Apache tears are obsidian nodules found in lava regions. Obsidian is volcanic glass, usually black, from which Western Indians made most o' their arrowheads. Apache tears are sometimes polished and made into beads that look like jet. Used in Indian-style costume jewelry.

Rattlesnake Rattles

Now let's touch on the old argument about a rattlesnake and his rattles. The old belief is that sizzletails have a rattle for every year of their age. Not so, friends. A rattler gets a new one every time he sheds his skin. Which may be two or three times in a season. A snake with 10 rattles might be only four-five years old, and generally is.

Another horrific varmint of the desert that's the subject of dispute is the scorpion. Some folks tell you its bite is deadly. Others say no.

Well, a man that's made a study of the subject from 6,000 captured specimens of scorpions says there's about five main varieties. Two of them can be deadly—if they bite you in a troublesome place, such as on the neck. The rest are venomous but not dangerous.

The slender, needle-tailed scorpion is the most dangerous kind. The big, fat loathsome ones that grow to be five inches long with a bulging poison sac on the tail, their sting lasts just a few hours.

Best ready-at-hand treatment for a scorpion bite, says this investigator, is ice packs.

Wild Areas Reopened

Here's an item of news that interests folks that enjoy desert exploring. The Navy has abandoned nearly all its rocket and bombing ranges in the Southwest. Which reopens wide areas that the public hasn't been allowed to enter for several years.

If you've roamed much on the desert you know the blistered sun-blasted appearance of a rocky landscape. The surface is a shiny brown-black, known as "desert varnish." The cause, geologists said, was intense volcanic heat in prehistoric times.

Turns out that this is another 'tain't-so. A college looker-into-things found that the pyramids of Egypt and old English glass windows had this same sort of "desert varnish". Finally he figured out the explanation.

Certain rocks—and glass too—that contain a lot of iron and manganese attracts a low-grade organism classified as a lichen. It builds up layer after layer, century after century, perishes and is sun-baked until it makes a melancholy glaze that pottery

makers have tried to copy but couldn't.

The man that prodded out this fact is J. D. Laudermilk. Like as not, you've crossed trails with him if you've travelled much in the wide, lonely spaces of the Great Southwest.

Wildlife Census

Here's something that's always mystificated me. It's how nature students take a wildlife census. How do they count things they don't actually see?

Mebbeso William V. Mendenhall, a National Forest supervisor, can explain how it's done. I hanker to meet up with him to find out. Awhile back Supervisor Mendenhall and a flock of assistants took a wild critter "snap census" of a big playground area from which they thought the native varmints had pretty well disappeared.

The tally was 12 mountain lions, 2,000 coyotes, 1,800 foxes, 1,300 bobcats, 1,250 skunks, 750 raccoons, 400 ringtailed cats, 300 opossums, 250 weasels and 22 badgers.

They further estimated that the creeks in them there parts contained 120,000 yearling trout.

I'm still wonderin' how it's done. Might be some o' you folks can tell me. I've heard that members of the Audubon Society make a nationwide tally of wild ducks and geese every year along about Christmas time.

A Fish Story

There's a popular notion that fish that live in cold water are livelier than ones in warm water. Thought so myself for a long time. Until I saw the tiny fish that inhabit warm—even hot—flows from certain desert hot springs. They streak out of sight faster than any mountain trout I ever saw.

It's sort of hard to believe, but some of these desert fish live in water that's as hot as a steaming cup of coffee that you can barely drink. You see 'em in the vicinity of Death Valley, also in parts of Mexico. These hot-water fish are minnow-size, about two inches long.

If all this talk gets you ambitious to make a desert pasear, let me remind you not to start a hike in hot weather, even a short one, unless you're desert-experienced or have a companion who has desert savvy.

Let me tell you about two gazabos who climbed to the top of Fortification Hill, Arizona. You'll recollect the place if you've visited Boulder Dam. Fortification Hill is the most prominent landmark thereabouts.

These gents got to the top and back. But it took them two days of tough travel and

[*Turn page*]

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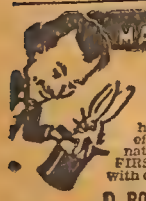

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they covered 17 miles. The actual airline distance of their little stroll, which they figured to do in a few hours, was only 1½ miles! That'll give you some idea of the difficulties of desert travel and how a tenderfoot can get himself in a jackpot.

The Way Down

The main thing to remember, specially in a climb, is to locate a way of getting down. It's easy to go up some places from where you just can't return—except via parachute.

One time another noodlehead and myself climbed a sandstone cliff in southern Utah to a ledge where we craved to look at an Indian cave. We went up like cats. But the comedown—that was the skeeriest thing I ever did.

I made it somehow. But my *companero,* he had hard, slick-soled shoes and got stuck halfway in the descent, where he hung there, clinging to a bush. There he stayed till I found a pair of rubber-soled shoes and climbed partway back up and threw 'em to him. Ever try changing shoes hanging onto a bush on the face of a cliff? He managed it, one-handed. But we stayed on flat ground for a long spell after that, I'll tell you, gals and galluses!

Be seeing you next month, everybody.

—CAPTAIN STARR

OUR NEXT ISSUE

TWO small, identical Aztec idols hold the key to the gripping mystery haunting the Big Thicket country of East Texas, in Jackson Cole's smashing novel, LAND OF HIDDEN LOOT, in the next big issue of TEXAS RANGERS. These heathen deities—but six inches in height, sitting cross-legged with stubby arms folded across their paunchy stomachs, and leering at the world before their eyes—are at the root of the terror that brings Ranger Jim Hatfield out on the danger trail again!

There is our clue to the reader for a story calculated to lift the hackles on the neck of the best Western fan—an action-packed drama in which the Lone Wolf meets up with the most harrowing adventures of his career.

The story is laid in the little-known cattle world of East Texas, a land of dark pine and vine-festooned oaks, weirdly tangled thickets and giant ferns, clawing creepers and jungle-like growth that give way to fertile meadows where sleek cattle graze.

Here it was that the Lone Wolf several years before fought it out with a cutthroat gang known as the Red Wolf's pack, but the leader himself, *El Lobo Rojo,* escaped with a

load of Jim Hatfield's lead in his hide.

As the Ranger once more travels between the ugly towns of Lucifer and Lordsburg, this time in answer to a call for aid from a ranch outfit, he can't help but recall the old mystery of the Red Wolf's complete disappearance from the Owlhoot trails.

So his senses are alert on the first night he camps in this weird jungle country of East Texas. In the distance he hears the bay of cougar hounds, approaching closer and closer. Then a silence broken only by the croaking of frogs along the nearby creek. And when their voices still, Jim Hatfield takes warning.

Placing a log inside his blankets to simulate his sleeping figure, the Lone Wolf slips away from his flickering fire to the shadow of a liveoak tree.

It isn't long before danger strikes—in the form of a skulker with a flaming six-gun in his fist, and Jim Hatfield is triggering back to save his life. And as the Lone Wolf bends over the body of his first foe, to see if he can identify the dead man, he is suddenly confronted by a pack of savage lion hounds. Taking to the safety of a tree, the Ranger waits for the owner of half-wild pack.

The story reads on:

Suddenly there was a louder rustling in the underbrush, and a figure came into the firelight —a human figure. The man paused at the edge of the clearing, his head turning slowly from side to side as he peered about the open space. Then, as he saw the dead man there on the ground, he got very still, staring suspiciously at the inert figure.

He was, Hatfield saw, a gaunt, slab-bodied man with a bushy red beard. He wore no hat, and he was entirely bald. In the dim firelight a livid scar showed high on the left side of his forehead. His clothes were splattered with mud.

The red-bearded man shuffled slowly forward until he stood over the still figure, touching it with the toe of his boot.

"You blood-hungry imps o' Cain!" he snarled suddenly, obviously at the dogs. "I didn't tell yuh to do this. Why didn't yuh wait till I got here?"

The dogs whined in the shadows.

Jim Hatfield leaped suddenly, landing lightly on the ground just behind the gaunt man. One of the Ranger's powerful arms whipped about the man's throat, the gun he held in the other hand jabbed hard against his spine.

The red-bearded man struggled fiercely for a few seconds. Hatfield was amazed that there could be such amazing strength and agility in a body so slight. But, against the Ranger's own terrific strength, the man might have been a child. Hatfield could have broken his neck with a single twist of his mighty arm.

He could hear the sudden throaty growls of the huge dogs in the shadows, knew they were about

[*Turn page*]

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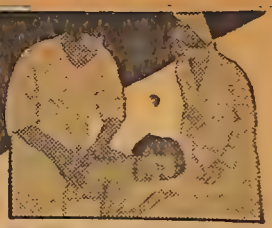

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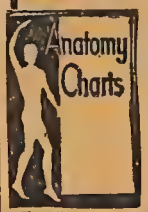

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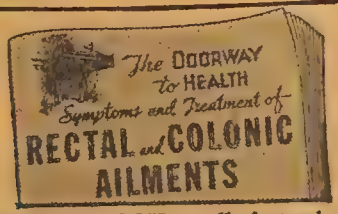

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to charge. The gun-muzzle bored harder.

"Stop the dogs—quick! Send them back!"

The bearded man snarled, "Back, yuh devils! I'll holler when I need yuh!"

The dogs, half a dozen of them, were already in the firelight, slinking slowly forward, their glaring eyes fixed unwinkingly on Hatfield. Now, at the red-bearded man's snarling order, they stopped, whirled and leaped back into the shadows.

Hatfield whirled the prisoner to face him. The man was snarling silently, almost like the dogs, as he glared at Hatfield. In his tawny eyes—eyes that had a peculiarly vacuous expression—was pure venom. The scar on his forehead glowed redly in the firelight.

The Ranger thought, *somewhere, sometime, I have seen this hombre before.* But he couldn't remember where.

It is in the cabin of this man who calls himself "Cougar" Creel that the Lone Wolf finds one of the six-inch Aztec idols—the leering heathen deity that is casting a spell of terror over the Big Thicket country. Not even the red-bearded Creel can explain the Indian image's importance. Nor can the owner of the second idol, which Jim Hatfield soon finds used as a commonplace paperweight in the Lazy K ranchhouse, where night riders have struck with smashing, murderous bullets time and time again.

It is the Lazy K that has sent the call to the Rangers for aid. As Jim Hatfield sits talking with Patricia Dane, the daughter of the kidnaped owner, the Lone Wolf notices an Aztec idol on an old desk.

Here is the scene:

Hatfield picked the idol up and looked with mild curiosity at the ugly thing. It was remarkably light, even for its size.

"It belonged to Uncle Sam Dane," the girl explained, noticing Hatfield's interest. "The thing gives me the creeps."

"Sam Dane had two of them, exactly alike," the Lazy K foreman added for the Ranger's benefit. "The other one disappeared right after Sam was killed. Who took it and why they'd want to steal such a thing, I don't know. It's worthless, I suppose."

Hatfield nodded, asked the girl, "What sort of queer things began to happen?"

"Why—why, just things, like strange noises at night, and lights moving in the thickets like somebody was searching for something. And gunshots. Two or three times daddy was shot at from ambush, although he was never hit."

Jim Hatfield's first surmise is that somebody wants possession of the Lazy K, and he asks Falcon, the foreman, if the man has any idea whom it might be. To quote from the story again:

"It's just a guess," Falcon said, "and maybe a bad one. For a good many years—maybe a hun-

dred—there have been rumors of an old Spanish treasure buried somewhere in the Big Thicket. In fact, in this immediate vicinity. Bar gold, and silver, and precious jewels, brought up out of Mexico when Cortez was on the rampage. Maybe there's something to the rumor, maybe not. Everybody knows that tales of Spanish treasure in Texas are thick as bristles on a hog's back. For each one that's true, a hundred are not. All I know is that the search for this one has never died down for long at a time."

"You think maybe," Hatfield asked slowly, "that this treasure is on the Lazy K?"

"I think *somebody* thinks it. I know men have searched here all durin' the last five years, ever since I've been here. I've seen their lights in the thickets at night. I've seen where they dug in the earth. The leader of the night riders who kidnaped Jim Dane, said to him—'You know where the loot is.' By that, I think that whoever they are, they not only believe the treasure is on the Lazy K but that it has been found. They killed Sam Dane because he wouldn't tell where it was hidden. They took Jim Dane for the same reason—because they think he knows where the treasure is and aim to try to make him tell."

"Then they're wrong!" Patricia Dane cried. "Father doesn't know anything about a buried treasure, any more than I do. He never talked to Uncle Sam before he died, hadn't seen him for years."

There's the background of LAND OF

[*Turn page*]

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OUR MAIL BOX

WE'VE received some mighty fine letters from the fans lately, and in this issue of TEXAS RANGERS, it might be a splendid idea to print as many of them as possible. But first let us say thanks to all the writers. And don't forget that we want a lot more mail. We want to know just exactly what you think of the stories, whether you have any criticism, and whether you might like a change. Perhaps some of you might get a swell idea for a Jim Hatfield story and we'll pass it on to Jackson Cole. Here goes:

Just a few lines to let you know what I think about TEXAS RANGERS. I have been reading Western magazines for about eight years. About four years ago I was in a newsstand looking for another book to read. I had seen all of them for the month except TEXAS RANGERS. Ever since that day I have bought TEXAS RANGERS every month. I think Jim Hatfield's stories are the best you can read.—*Mrs. Milo Delazzer, Oakland, Cal.*

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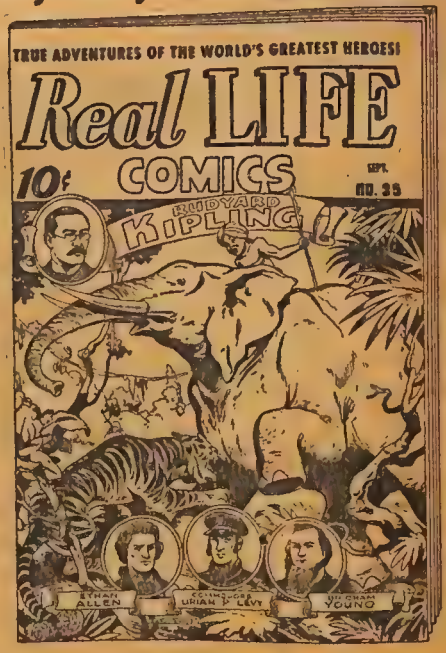

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I have just finished reading THE DEATH RIDERS. It was my first copy of TEXAS RANGERS, but it proved to be very interesting. Jim Hatfield is a swell person. Some day I hope to be a person like him, although now I am a tenderfoot as far as the West is concerned. I intend to read TEXAS RANGERS every time the magazine comes on sale. It seems as if the reader is the one who does the action.—*Clovis Conley, Mansie, Ky.*

I have been reading Jim Hatfield's adventures for over a year and enjoy every one of them. He is wonderful and Goldy is so smart and sweet. My favorite story was DEATH RIDERS. My favorite magazine from now on is TEXAS RANGERS.—*Dorothy McGee, Troutman, N. C.*

I have been reading TEXAS RANGERS for six years and sure do enjoy 'em. I think RED MARAUDERS was good. I don't miss an issue.—*Isaac Adcock, Philadelphia, Miss.*

I am a Puerto Rican, and I am a recent reader of TEXAS RANGERS and your companion magazines: RIO KID WESTERN, POPULAR WESTERN, and MASKED RIDER WESTERN. Here's a suggestion. I'd like for Jim Hatfield to have a friend that isn't a Ranger to go with him on his trips.—*Rafael Cestero, Jr., Rio Piedras, P. R.*

I have just read the last TEXAS RANGERS, which was my first time to read this magazine. The actions of Jim Hatfield really hold you spellbound to the very last page. I certainly enjoyed reading the other stories in the magazine, also.—*Mrs. Lonnie G. Jordan, Shreveport, La.*

I think TEXAS RANGERS is the best Western magazine published. I have just started reading it, but each story is better than the rest. I read THE EMPIRE TRAIL and BAD MEDICINE FOR BUCKAROOS, and sure enjoyed them. Keep up with the good stories. And see if the next story will stand in line also. I wish they were published more often, for I can hardly wait. *Adios.—Francis Wenzoski, Winnipeg, Manitoba.*

Just a line or two to tell you how much I enjoy reading TEXAS RANGERS. I have been reading the magazine for two years and all the stories are swell, especially the novels.—*Mary Lee Dixon, Lufkin, Texas.*

It seems just right to sign off for this issue with a letter from a lady in Texas, for she ought to know about the Western atmosphere in the Jim Hatfield stories. It's too bad we can't print all the letters we get from the mailman, but don't let that keep any of you from writing us because yours might be the one we pick. And it certainly does our heart good to hear from each and every one of you. You may be sure every letter is deeply appreciated and carefully read.

Be sure to address your envelope or postcard to The Editor, TEXAS RANGERS, 10 East 40th Street, New York 16, N. Y. And thanks again. We'll be seeing you next issue!

—THE EDITOR.

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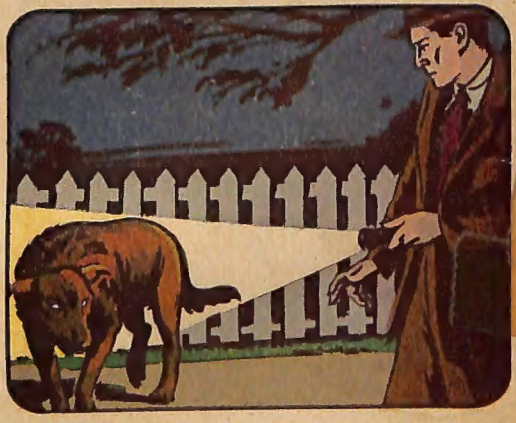

3 Keep still. Don't move. Don't run—it's instinctive with most animals to attack anything that runs away or moves aggressively. If the dog refrains from attacking for a few seconds, you have probably won—he is apt to growl at the light, then slink off, outbluffed.

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